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HER OWN PEOPLE

To Gladys
With Love and Best
Wishes.

FROM Pamela

Christmas 1945

By the same Author

THE COMPANY'S SERVANT

THE YOUNGEST MISS MOWBRAY

ETC.

HER OWN PEOPLE

By
Mrs. B. M. CROKER

103RD THOUSAND

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DEDICATION
TO
EDITH M. VINCENT
with the Author's love

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CHAPTER I

"OH yes! I know what it is to be hard up myself; I'm hard up now!—but I'll help you in another way. You must marry, Malcolm, my boy! Leave it to me, and I'll find you a rich wife!"

In making the foregoing boastful promise, Sir Horace Haig raised a naturally harsh voice, and all but shouted his officious announcement. The empty air seemed to echo the words, "rich wife"—"rich wife," their regular measured tread to repeat, "rich wife"—"rich wife," as the two men, uncle and nephew, hurried down a by-street in Homburg.

There was good reason for haste, a neighbouring clock was chiming the hour, and already they were unfashionably late for the morning ceremonies at the Elisabeth Brunnen.

"But——" began the prospective Benedict, in a doubtful tone.

"My grandfather used to say," interrupted his uncle, in a loud authoritative key, "that a man should marry young, and marry often. He had four wives!"

"And you, sir, have not had one!" rejoined his companion, with unexpected audacity.

"Oh—ah—well, yes—that is true—but the fact is, I had an unhappy love affair—(a fiction invented on the spot)—a—a—blighted life—a blighted life!!—it is a—a painful subject."

Here Sir Horace suddenly turned into a narrow foot-path, where, as it was necessary to walk in single file, awkward questions were evaded, or postponed.

The subject of "a blighted life" was a spruce, straight-backed gentleman of sixty, with a large hooked nose, and two keen little blue eyes, sheltered by a pair of beetling brows; he dressed in a careful middle-aged style, and wore his clothes, and his years, with ease.

Sir Horace was the seventh Baronet—a resolute old bachelor, who enjoyed a comfortable income, and was on the committee of the Bellona Club. He claimed an immense acquaintance, and was fairly popular, being recognised as a fine judge of vintage, or a cook, and one of the best bridge players in London. It is painful

to add that he was incredibly selfish, and never expended a shilling on any more deserving object than Horace Haig, Baronet; and yet, in a hearty jovial fashion, he contrived to extract an astonishing amount of hospitality and favours, from other people!

Such an individual was naturally the last man in the world to trouble himself respecting his relations—and, above all, his poor relations. Nevertheless, on the present occasion he was accompanied by his nephew and heir. Indeed it was in answer to his uncle's warm invitation (but not at his expense) that Captain Haig was visiting Homburg before rejoining his regiment in India.

Malcolm Haig was a well-set-up young officer, with a pair of merry blue eyes, and a touch of sunshine in his closely cropped locks. Sir Horace introduced, with an air of bland complacency, a kinsman who did him credit, made no demands on his patience, nor yet upon his pocket. All the same, he had excellent reason to know that Malcolm was "hard up." His private means were nominal, and he was about to conclude a year's leave in England—a year's leave is often an expensive luxury. Under such circumstances his banker's account would be uncomfortably low—in fact, Malcolm had said as much. Sir Horace was disposed to exert his social influence, and endeavour to do the poor young fellow a good turn. He was handsome and well born; if his purse was lean, he had an adventurous spirit and a susceptible heart.

As uncle and nephew followed the winding path which led to the far-famed Elisabeth Well, the latter was struck by the exceptional beauty of their surroundings, the admirably-kept greensward, the shady trees and flowering shrubs, on which the early dew was still glistening.

There was a delicious perfume of roses in the air, and the inspiring sound of a string band in the near distance.

"I say," began the young man, now walking beside his companion, "I had no idea that Homburg was like this—half park, half garden, and so pretty."

"Hadn't you!" rejoined his uncle gruffly; "well, I suppose it is! This is my twenty-seventh season—I've got over the first raptures by this time."

"I don't believe I could ever come back to the same place twenty-seven times."

"Think it argues a lack of originality? It would depend on its attractions. You don't want to go back to Perapore twenty-seven times, eh?"

"By Jove, no—nor twice!" he answered, with emphasis.

"But here it is different, my boy. It is good for one's liver, it is gay, and, as you remark, pretty. There is any amount of entertaining; dinners and luncheons; there is golf and tennis. I meet the people I know—or want to know. In short, Homburg has become an agreeable habit, which there is no occasion to relinquish. And here we are!" he announced, as they emerged from a shady walk into a wide and crowded promenade.

At one end of this promenade was the celebrated well, at present closely invested by a number of votaries, who were sipping their first glass, or waiting to be served by the active, blue-gowned maidens.

Here were young and old, society folk and nobodies, a Russian Grand Duke stood elbow to elbow with a Scotch grocer, and the Countess of Marmalade was patiently waiting till Cora Sans Souci was served.

As soon as Sir Horace had swallowed his glass (he took it warm), and having vainly urged his nephew to pledge him in another, he carried him off to stroll up and down, between the bandstand and the jewellers' shops. As they sauntered along he saluted almost every second person, and indicated the chief notabilities to his relation.

"Here comes the Duke of Luxembourg," and he swept off his hat, "getting very shaky on his pins, poor old boy. This man passing now with the lady in the Ascot frock is De Jeers, the great Jew financier. She is Lady Merrythought, and getting all she can out of him, I'll lay long odds. The pale girl in the white linen gown is the notorious "Sauta"—the Spanish dancer. She stabbed a man with a hat pin the other day. This couple comparing prescriptions are the Bishop of Timbuctoo and Dooley, the steeplechase jock. The lady with the head of Borzois is the Duchess of Valetta, and the little woman with the brown poodle is Madame Cuzco; that poodle is a European celebrity, and has his own manservant and barber. Now let us go and sit on one of the seats and watch the madding crowd."

"All right," assented his nephew, "they certainly are a wonderfully-mixed lot! Look at these two swarthy giantesses—regular six-footers—a most formidable couple!"

"Oh, the Misses Rookes—twins. They go by the name of the 'Powerful' and the 'Terrible!'"

Captain Haig laughed aloud.

"Yes," resumed his mentor, "and this little dressy woman with tremendous knee action, who prances alongside of the rosy-cheeked youth, is Mrs. Waller, with her third husband. They are known as 'the Skipper and the Boy!'"

"Splendid!" ejaculated the other.

"And that red-faced man yonder is Turnbull, the great traveller. He is called 'the Crimson Rambler!' Rather good, eh?"

"Rather—but who are these coming now?—this girl and the squat old woman—walking in a sort of crowd, with a dog?"

"Oh, that is Madame de Godez—Madame de Gaudy they call her—fabulously wealthy widow. She always reminds me of a toad, with her dark, mottled face, bright black eyes, and huge chinless mouth. Madame is a personage here, as you may see. Gives wonderful dinners and picnics, subscribes to everything, and is quite in the smart set!"

"Great Scotland!" ejaculated his listener, "why, she looks for all the world like an old Portuguese half-caste!"

"She is Portuguese, I believe; of blue, not black, blood."

"And the girl?—she is a jewel, if the other is a toad. The princess and the witch. What do they call her here?"

"Miss Chandos. She is Madame's adopted daughter, and lives with old de Godez—goes everywhere, and has a good time."

"What do you call a good time?" questioned Captain Haig as his eyes followed the de Godez group.

"She has everything money can purchase, each wish forestalled, boundless admiration, forty-guinea frocks, and as many proposals of marriage as there are days in the week."

"Oh, I say, come!" expostulated his nephew.

"Well, I know for a fact that she refused Dormer Lisle and Tubby Coote, and, they say, Lord Caraway. Observe that young officer in the Frankfurt Dragoons rushing on his fate, and the dark, foreign-looking chap leading the dog is Prince Tossati, an Italian prince, long pedigree, lean purse!"

Captain Haig stared intently at the group, which had halted to greet some friends within a few yards of his seat—at the stout old woman, who had no chin or neck

to speak of, but a shrewd, piercing eye—a bargaining eye—and a far-reaching, authoritative voice. She was dressed with great magnificence, in a crimson and black foulard, and in her ears blazed two large diamonds. There was something tragic in the intensity of the effort and the insufficiency of the result; for all her pains Madame de Godez was merely an ugly old woman who waddled like a duck. During her progress she talked incessantly in a high falsetto—chiefly to a man who strolled beside her—listening with an air of reverent attention, his head bent, his hands loosely clasped behind his back. It would be difficult to imagine a more complete contrast than that presented by Madame de Godez and her niece. Miss Chandos was a tall and graceful demoiselle, who moved with deliberate, indolent gait; her flowing white gown was studiously plain; she wore no ornaments, and few would have cast a second glance at her large black hat. It was a certain air of personal distinction which arrested attention, for if her toilet was simple, her carriage was regal. Her head was firmly set upon a long white throat, and the face beneath the shady hat was unquestionably beautiful. The girl's complexion indicated the morn and dew of youth; her features were cut with the precision of a cameo; her eyes and hair were dark, and both were glorious.

The lady's manner was considerably more animated than her movements. She talked and laughed gaily and uninterruptedly, with a slim, sallow cavalier (obviously her bondsman) who conducted Madame's morose-looking pet by a long leather strap.

This animal was an elderly terrier, who did not appreciate these early promenades where he was restrained from speaking to his own species—and was secretly dosed with nasty waters. He loathed the foreign food, foreign manners, foreign tongue—he never met an English pal, or enjoyed a day's good English sport. Oh, where were the rabbits, the cats, and friends and the enemies of his youth? He was an ill-used, expatriated animal, as surly and injured as any other old gentleman compelled to reside on the Continent against his inclination. Madame de Godez invariably addressed the poor creature as "Dog Darling," for she was passionately attached to him, despite his churlish humours; but he remained his own dog, and nobody's darling, as he was half-dragged, half-led, in the train of a triumphal progress.

Captain Haig's eyes dwelt long on this particular group, and his uncle, noting the fact, made a sudden and startling remark.

"Malcolm, my boy, that girl would be the very wife for you!" and when he had enunciated this opinion, he coughed, and gave his neat washing tie an emphatic twitch.

"Wife for me, sir? 'i" repeated his relative, "but I'm not looking for one!"

"No! well it is never too late to mend—and fully time you were making a search. Handsome heiresses won't fall into your mouth, and nothing but an heiress will suit. I may live till I'm ninety, you know—and, anyway, I'm a poor man. Don't wait till you are a stiff, stocky old fellow, for, if you do, you *may* wait. But now, when you are a smart-looking chap, and I can give you a shove, is your time. There is a tide in the affairs of men, which, taken at the flood, leads on to a fortune."

"I don't think a lady with a fortune would care to swelter in India," remarked his companion, "and I could not bring myself to live at home on my wife's money."

"Hut-tut-tut!" exclaimed Sir Horace, and his eyebrows assumed an expression which invariably struck terror to the hearts of club waiters. "That sort of talk is bosh! It's of no consequence which has the coin, so long as it's *there*—and I could show you a dozen men who live quite happily with wealthy wives—and haven't a rap of their own!"

There was a silence for two or three moments, broken only by the buzz of voices and the strains of the "Valse Bleu." At last the younger man spoke.

"What sort of girl is this Miss Chandos?"

"The sort of girl you see. A beautiful creature who carries herself superbly, knows how to talk, and to walk, and to put on her clothes. As far as I'm aware, she neither gambles, swears, smokes nor drinks!"

"Good Lord, I should hope not!" ejaculated his nephew.

"But mind you" (here Sir Horace's tone changed into a graver key), "she is perfectly sensible of her own value—though affable and gracious to all. Perhaps a little supercilious to her foreign slaves—especially the Italian—she has a horror of dusky complexions and black blood which amounts to a craze."

"Then what about the aunt?" enquired Captain Haig, with rather malicious significance.

"My dear boy, I've already assured you that Madame is of *sang azur*—an old Alcantara family. She married a Scotchman who made a fortune in indigo. The girl has been brought up in England, and polished abroad. I believe she is twenty-two years of age. From personal experience I am in a position to inform you that she can keep her temper, hold her tongue, write a fine hand, and add up a bridge account."

"Oh, well, that is something."

"The old woman has given her a superior education, and lavished money on her, and now takes her everywhere, for the pure pleasure of the reflected glory she enjoys as aunt of the celebrated Miss Chandos! The girl is her hobby. Instead of cats, china, or old furniture, her craze is Verona, and she carries her about, and exhibits her, like a prize animal, enters her for all the big shows, such as this—and when her property comes in an easy first, looks on with a grin extending from ear to ear, and for all I know, meeting under her wig!"

Here Sir Horace paused, and struck his cane forcibly on the gravel as he added:

"Miss Chandos is the beauty here this year; all the world is at her feet."

"And what does she say to all the world?"

"Nothing particular. Takes it as a matter of course—though she is not a bit conceited, to give her her due—smiles and laughs, as you see, and turns to conquests new."

"Such as the chap in the blue coat! Are the poor devils *never* out of uniform?"

"Never, except at tennis, and then they change before leaving the pavilion. Miss Chandos would be a splendid match for some needy baron or princelet. She will come in for fifteen thousand a year, and the money is all there—I happen to know it for a fact."

"Fifteen thousand a year—and beauty—will never stoop to a poor captain in the line!"

"Why not!" argued Sir Horace, "a good-looking chap, a future baronet, with a pedigree that goes back to the Picts, is not to be despised!"

"He will be despised, all the same," muttered his nephew, in a tone of sombre conviction.

"And I tell you, you can't do better, Malcolm. I'll

present you; it's an intimate sort of life—we all meet three or four times daily; golf and picnics are easily arranged. Then there is the Casino Terrace of a night, and romantic sequestered walks hard by. In a week you should be able to report progress. The game lies to your hand!”

“I assure you, sir, I really could not face it; it's too cold-blooded! too bare-faced—and there is something unnatural in sitting here, on a bench before breakfast, coolly discussing a possible marriage with a girl to whom I've never even spoken!”

“A marriage discussed before breakfast is far more likely to be a success than one arranged after dinner!” responded Sir Horace, with knitted brows. “I'm afraid you are a fool! What have you against it?”

“Nothing. I admit that Miss Chandos is the prettiest girl I've seen for ages. I admire her immensely. Now if she had but a few hundreds a year——”

“She would not do at all,” interrupted his uncle impatiently. “Well! the gods cannot help a man who refuses opportunity. Why should you not try your luck?”

“What's the good—it will only be adding to her scalps.”

“Nothing venture, nothing have,” declared Sir Horace, rising as he spoke. “Come, we must be moving—it is long past the time for my second glass.”

Captain Haig got upon his legs with some reluctance, gave himself a little shake, stamped down his trousers, and in another moment was walking away in the footsteps of his mentor.

CHAPTER II

SIR HORACE, followed by his nephew, made his way briskly to the well, and having cast one searching glance among the crowd, immediately descended the steps, where in a few moments he and Captain Haig found themselves wedged in closest proximity to Madame de Godez. On nearer inspection, she really proved to be one of the ugliest old women in Homburg, in spite of her costly clothes, elaborate black wig, and brilliant earrings: but it was a shrewd—nay, a clever face; and the countenance expressed not only determination but animation. Madame instantly accosted her neighbour in a sort of bleating foreign key, each syllable most distinctly articulated.

“Oh ho, my friend! so here you are! Just get my glass filled, will you? it is my own propertee,” and as she spoke Madame handed Sir Horace a gorgeous red and gold tumbler. “This ees your nephew, ees it not?” and she looked up at Malcolm, with an eager twinkling gaze, and nodded her head with an air of affable encouragement.

“Good Lord!” he said to himself, “why the old woman talks the purest Chi-Chi!”

Meanwhile the old woman was inspecting him with her quick black eyes, and as he swept off his Homburg hat, and stood momentarily bare-headed, she was aware of his shining locks, deep blue eyes and winning smile (oh, the hypocrite!). Here was a young man, with the face of the hero in a picture-book. Between two sips of water she remarked:

“Your nephew is not one beet like you, Sir Horace. He is quite nice-looking!”

“Oh, but, dear lady, you should have seen *me* at his age,” protested the Baronet, with a ludicrous effort to look languishing, but the beetling brows frustrated the attempt.

“Now do not pretend that you were handsome,” she retorted, giving him a playful poke, “for I will nott believe eet.”

“How cruel of you, madame,” he rejoined, as he took her tumbler and held it, whilst he gazed down into her swarthy, wrinkled face with an air of melancholy reproach, “when I am prepared to believe anything you tell me, and to swear that you were the belle of—was it Lisbon?”

"Verona," screeched the quondam beauty, ignoring Sir Horace and his tender question—"where is Dog Darling? Do take care that he is not trampled on."

"He is all right, auntie," replied her niece, "I left him with the Prince."

"Ah," with a gasp of relief, "then thatt is arl-right. This is Sir Horace's nephew, Verona—my niece, Miss Chandos."

The young lady looked at Malcolm gravely, and inclined her head an inch or two. Unlike her aunt, her appearance challenged the most critical inspection, and bore, triumphantly, the ordeal of a searching gaze. The shape of her face was perfect, her beautiful dark eyes were merry and intelligent, but the short upper lip was slightly supercilious.

"A frightful crowd, is it not?" she observed.

"Yes, and getting worse every moment," declared Sir Horace, taking the remark entirely to himself; "allow me to pilot you out of it," and to the amusement and admiration of his companion, he proceeded to manœuvre madame and her niece far away from their own party. Giving the former his arm up the steps, he said:

"Malcolm, I will leave you to look after Miss Chandos."

"Who is very well able to take care of herself, thank you," she answered. Then, turning to Malcolm as they strolled along in the wake of their elders, she continued:

"Have you come to do the cure?"

"Well, no, I'm merely an outsider—a spectator," he confessed, "but I suppose I must drink something to give me the run of the place. Something to talk about, and to establish a common interest with other people."

"Very well, then," she rejoined with equal gravity, "between seven and eight o'clock, you take three glasses of the Elisabeth Brunnen—with a promenade of fifteen minutes between each. This, with a salt bath at eleven, and a couple of tumblers of the Staal Brunnen at three o'clock, will instantly place you on a proper footing with society. "Now"—and she came to a standstill—"where is that dog?"

"Are you his keeper?" he asked in a bantering tone.

"Not exactly; I left him in charge of Prince Alessandro when we went down to the well."

"Proud animal!" ejaculated Captain Haig, "it is not every terrier who has a Prince for a dog boy!"

"Dog boy," she echoed, "what do you mean?"

"It is an Indian term. All Europeans with dogs there keep their servant body to look after them, and accompany them out walking."

"Oh, I see, and the Prince is doing dog boy for *me*. Well, he is quite devoted to Dog Darling. You were going to say something?" and she looked at her companion interrogatively.

"I was," he admitted, with a laugh, "but second thoughts are best."

"But I should like to hear your first thought. I insist on your telling me; it is sure to be far more entertaining than its successor."

"Oh, well, I was merely going to quote an old saw!"

"Yes?"

"Love me, love my dog!"

"A decrepit saying, and entirely out of fashion. Love me, and loathe my dog, is far more up to date, especially since these lap dogs are the rage. Then why not hate me, and love my dog! There are one or two people—whose *dogs* I adore. Oh, dear me! just look at auntie! who cannot be trusted out of my sight. She is eating peaches. That is Sir Horace's doing! He has offered them to her, and she cannot resist, although she is strictly forbidden to touch raw fruit!"

"Would you imply that my respectable uncle is playing the part of the serpent?"

"No, but auntie is here for the cure, in order to get thin, and she won't give herself a chance. She promises and vows all manner of things to her doctor, and breaks her word as soon as she is out of his sight. She sits up late, she eats creams and rich dishes, takes no exercise, and is full of stern resolutions for to-morrow—it is always to-morrow!"

"I gather that between your aunt and the dog your responsibilities are serious."

"Yes, very serious," she answered with a gay little nod.

As they loitered along together, Captain Haig was sensible of the many admiring eyes which were turned towards his companion, and of certain envious scowls which fell to him. Half glances, whole stares, beaming smiles, and impressive salutes attended the lady's progress. Yes, for sheer, blazing, aggressive admiration Miss Chandos received the palm.

After all, he asked himself, what was she to be thus

acclaimed? A tall girl, with a pair of wonderful dark eyes, a brilliant complexion, a radiant smile!

"I suppose you come abroad every year?" he questioned, after a pause.

"Oh, no," she replied, "we live abroad. And you?"

"Yes; but my abroad is Asia; yours, I conclude, is Europe. My abroad spells duty, and yours pleasure."

"Not altogether," rejoined Miss Chandos. "We live out of England as a duty to an animal. We roam the Continent because of the dog."

Captain Haig looked at her with a puzzled air, then gave a short incredulous laugh.

"But, I assure you that it is quite true," she continued, "Auntie is devoted to Dog Darling, and owing to these dreadful new regulations he would have to go into quarantine in England for six months; either that, or be left at Calais. Such a separation would break his dear heart—and be the death of auntie."

"And so you remain an exile as long as he lives?"

"Yes."

"Is he old?"

"About nine; but he comes of a long-lived family, and has a fine constitution."

"If I were you, I should administer some of the waters," suggested Captain Haig.

"If you mean with felonious intent, I repudiate your heartless advice. I am sincerely attached to Toby."

"But are you not also attached to home?"

"Well, you see, we have no home. When we were in England we lived at hotels—and I am thoroughly at home on the Continent."

"And know it well?"

"Yes, some places, such as Paris, the Riviera, and Aix. I've also been to Rome and Venice. We always winter in the South."

"Possibly on account of Toby," suggested the young man. "I absolutely decline to call him Darling."

"You have made a sort of half-guess," she answered with a smile, "I will not conceal from you that a certain chemist at Nice is a celebrated dog doctor, and once, when Darling had bronchitis, auntie stayed on a month longer, on purpose to be near him, although we had taken our rooms at Venice. Is this your first visit to Germany?"

"Yes, I only arrived yesterday. I had no idea Hom-

burg was such a charming place—partly garden, park and forest. My uncle never prepared me.”

“I don’t fancy the beauties of nature would appeal to Sir Horace.”

“No, he is a practical man. If he were shown the mountains of the moon in a strong telescope, he would immediately wonder if there was grouse on them?”

“Then he and auntie would thoroughly agree. Are you remaining long?”

“I’m on my way back to India, worse luck, and sail from Marseilles in ten days.”

“Ah, so you don’t like the East?”

“No, I suppose because I’m nailed out there by duty. Just as you are held fast by the dog. Of course, it’s the best country for soldiering—lots of room to manœuvre and turn round.”

“I’ve always cherished a wild wish to see India,” she said. “Auntie lived there for years, but she abhors it, and has not one single good word for the country. Other people rave in its praise. What do you say, Captain Haig—speaking unofficially?”

“Well”—and he took a long breath—“I admit that, like the curate’s egg, parts of it are good. But where I am stationed it is all cotton, soil, sugar cane, and sun.”

“No antiquities?”

“Nothing more venerable than the oldest resident! Of course, your aunt was born out there?” he rashly ventured, then could have bitten his tongue in two. He glanced at his companion, but she appeared to be serenely unconscious of any *faux pas*, the exquisite pink in her fair cheek had not deepened in shade, as she answered with an air of cool reflection.

“I’m not sure. I don’t think so. But I know that she was married out there!”

“Ah!” he ejaculated, “then, perhaps, that is why she dislikes the country?”

Miss Chandos gave him a quick look and made no reply. Captain Haig again regretted having spoken unadvisedly, and on this occasion he felt distinctly snubbed.

“Do you play golf?” asked the lady abruptly.

“No, I cannot say that I play,” he stammered, “but my uncle does.”

“That sounds exactly like a sentence from Ollendorf.

‘I do not ride on horseback, but the sister of our neighbour does.’ You really must take to golf!”

“Verona, child,” screamed her aunt, “what are you loitering for? Come along, this sun is too hot for Dog Darling. We must be going. Captain Haig,” turning to Malcolm, “your uncle has promised to bring you to dine with me to-night, at Ritter’s. I have engaged a table—seven o’clock is the hour. So mind you are not late! Good-bye—good-bye—good-bye!”

As she made her adieux, madame—who was decidedly solid in figure—was respectfully hoisted into a smart victoria. Verona took a place beside her. Dog Darling nimbly accepted the front seat, and in another moment a pair of smart bay steppers had borne the trio out of sight.

CHAPTER III

"I FLATTER myself I managed that rather neatly," remarked the Baronet, as he surveyed his nephew with a complacent grin, "an introduction, a *tête-à-tête*, and an invitation, all within half-an-hour."

"You could not have done more, sir, had you been a London chaperon of twenty seasons. I assure you I am duly grateful."

"And I tell you what, young man," resumed Sir Horace, now turning to pace beside him, "whilst you were laying siege to the young lady's heart, I was compelled to listen to a history of her aunt's liver affection, and an alarming account of the condition of her internal organs. Some old women have only three topics: disease, domestics, and diet. Besides these, Madame de Godez has a famous appetite—for compliments."

"Which I presume you were good enough to feed."

"Yes; in my experience, the uglier the old beldame, the more she craves for admiration. I am deservedly well established in Madame's good graces—in fact, in her present frame of mind, I believe she would marry me to-morrow—if I asked her!"

"She is enormously rich, and looks the soul of good nature," urged the young man, and his tone implied encouragement.

"Quite true; but I have lived very comfortably without a wife for sixty-one years, and I'm not going to be such an old fool as to take one now, even if she *is* worth her weight in gold. No, no, Malcolm, my boy, joking apart, if the dowager favours you, and the young lady accepts you, you can chuck the Service to-morrow, and forfeit your return ticket, for your fortune is made!"

"Don't you think you are going ahead too fast, sir? For all you and I know, there may be twenty Richmonds in the field."

"No," responded Sir Horace, with emphasis, "your only serious rival is young Prince Tossati, the chap she left to mind the dog and carry the parasol. He is one of the five sons of an impoverished Italian duke, who has a palace full of priceless pictures and statuary, which he may not sell—desperately as he is in need of ready money. His pedigree goes back to the Cæsars, but unfortunately this is also non-transferable. I don't believe

the poor beggar can lay hands on more than six hundred a year, and the sole chances for the sons—are heiresses. One has married an American girl in Pork, and our friend Alessandro has figuratively marked the fair Verona for his own."

"He is an insignificant little chap! as dark as an Arab," sneered Captain Haig.

"Yes," assented his uncle, "I declare when I see him, I can't help looking for the monkey and the organ! but he has a title—a real one, mind you—and I believe Madame would give one of her eyes, or even go without her dinner for a whole week, to be in a position to say, 'my niece, the Princess!'"

"Oh, but she is not really her niece," objected Malcolm, with a touch of impatience. "Why, Madame is exactly like an old Portuguese half-caste, such as one sees on the West Coast!"

"I can only tell you, that the girl has lived with her for twenty years," responded Sir Horace with solemn deliberation, "and no one has ever heard of, or seen, any other relations."

"And how did Madame de Godez get into Society?"

"Possibly because she did not care a straw about it, for one thing; for another, she makes no false pretences, is notoriously good-natured, and enormously rich, and she has also a fair supply of homely honesty and a brusque wit."

"And where did her fortune come from?"

"Ah! now you go beyond me!" said Sir Horace, "from piracy, for all I know!" and he laughed. "Madame is rather like the stock character of a pirate's wife. But one thing is certain, the money is all there. Madame will give us a first-rate dinner to-night, so don't eat a heavy lunch. It will be none of your Homburg affairs, no occasion to bring your purse and ask for the bill at dessert!"

"What do you mean?"

"Oh, it's a good old local custom. Friends invite you to dine at their hotel, and you go. They pay for the flowers, and perhaps the coffee—everyone settles for themselves—and there you are!"

"There I should not be," rejoined his nephew, with a laugh of contempt.

"I grant that it is undoubtedly a moderate form of entertainment, but you meet your acquaintance. Of

course, there are other dinners, too, the dear familiar kinds. See here—" suddenly coming to a halt in front of a flower stall not far from Ritter's Hotel, and lifting as he spoke a bunch of exquisite roses to his face—" I'll send this to the aunt; the old lady likes little attentions. Do you buy one for the niece. We can leave them with the hall porter as we pass."

"Oh, but I say," expostulated his companion, "I don't like to send a bouquet to a girl I've only spoken to once, she would think it such awful cheek."

"Not at all," replied Sir Horace, "it is perfectly correct here. At Homburg you do as Homburg does. I know my way about, my boy; pay up and look pleasant; four marks, and—oh, you may as well pay for me too. I've no change. I'll make it all right by-and-by."

Captain Haig nodded, as he produced a small gold piece and handed it across the stand, well aware that he was about to present not one, but two bouquets.

"You don't think she'd like a little dog as well?" suggested Sir Horace facetiously, as he eyed some black Spitz puppies, which were being hawked about hard by.

"No, I fancy Miss Chandos finds one dog enough, to go on with."

His uncle gave a loud harsh laugh as they moved away, each carrying a superb bunch of La France roses.

Madame de Godez and her niece were at *déjeuner* when the two bouquets made their appearance. To be perfectly correct, Miss Chandos had finished and was busy with a pencil and paper; but her aunt was still actively engaged.

"What do you think of Sir Horace's nephew, Verona?" she inquired, as she turned over the flowers and sniffed at them.

"Oh," looking up from her writing, "he is not bad."

"Bad—not bad! whatt a girl to talk so! Why he is very good-looking."

"Yes, I suppose he is; and it is rather a relief to meet with a stranger who has never been here before, and does not know anyone, or even his way about. I declare his ignorance is quite refreshing!"

"O—ah! he will not be long ignorant," replied Madame, squeezing up her eyes, "his uncle is worldly wise. *He* will educate him!"

"Oh, auntie, you know you promised Dr. Krauss you would not touch fruit and cream, and you have had two

helpings, besides macaroni and fish. You really must not be so foolish."

"Now, now, now, Verona," she protested peevishly, "do let me a-lone! Why may I not eat my food? It is all I have to enjoy. You spoil my appetite; you always worry so. Here, Dog Darling! come and taste this lobster cutlet—so good, dear! Why!" with a gasp of surprise, "he won't touch it!"

"Wise dog," said Verona, "he knows what agrees with him. I'm sure animals are more sensible about their food than we are. I must write out the cards for the dinner table now. We shall be thirty with these two men."

"Their flowers may as well be sent down for the table," suggested Madame (who dearly loved similar small economies). "Let me see, dear, the names," and she glanced over a half-sheet of paper. "Lord and Lady Bosworth, Monsieur and Madame de la Vallance, General Huntly, Prince Tossati—oh, by the way, my dear child, why were you so unkind to him to-day, leaving the poor fellow to carry on things, and lead about Dog Darling, whilst you walked off with a stranger? Better not do so again. He was hurt, I could see, he looked quite white with emotion!"

"Dearest auntie, he never could look white. His skin is the colour of *safran* when he turns pale—he merely becomes sallow."

"He is a handsome young fellow, with the blood of emperors in his veins."

"Maybe so, but he is as swarthy as a Moor. He might be Emperor of Morocco. His hair is lank, his eyes are two ink pools. I am sure he is a most estimable young man, who writes every day to his mother, but if we get up tableau, I solemnly warn you that I shall certainly invite him to do Othello."

"O—ah, Verona, for shame of you! You prefer the red-haired young officer."

"Red hair—oh, oh!" she laughed. "You know very well, auntie, that I prefer no one."

"Because you are so hard to please—so proud! Pray, what is the difference between Tossati and Sir Horace's nephew?"

"Well, if you ask me, I should say, that one was a black prince, and the other a white man!"

"Oh, my! my! my! whatt things you do say! quite

shocking—though you are but joking; you are nevarre in earnest—nevarre!”

“But occasionally I am,” retorted the girl, suddenly rising. “For instance, I am in earnest now, when I tell you that your mud bath will be ready in a quarter of an hour.” And as she spoke, she rang a loud peal on the bell.

“Oh, no, no!” wailed her companion, beating the air with two little dumpy hands. “I will not to-day, I will—not. These early hours do kill me. I am too fatigued. No. I will go and lie down for a while and be fresh for this afternoon. I will not take the bath, I will not.”

“But really, auntie——”

“Really, child, I promised the duchess to go to her bazaar. I know you are going to play golf. No, I will not take this nasty mud bath—you must not insist—you must *not!*”

“Well I shall tell Dr. Krauss,” said Verona, nodding her head, “you know you are dreadfully afraid of him.”

“I will take it to-morrow—really and truly—oh, truly, I give you my word! Look here, dearie, I cannot take Dog Darling to the bazaar. I think you might allow him to go with you to the Golf. Do!”

“No, indeed, he fetches half the balls, then loses them, and disgraces me.”

“Oh, well, then I must ask Minette to get a fly and take him for a nice drive round Saarbruck. The air will do him good, poor darling!”

CHAPTER IV

THE dinner at Ritter's proved a brilliant affair, but Sir Horace experienced an unexpected disappointment, when he discovered that instead of being a guest at a pleasant little informal meal, he and his nephew were two in a party of thirty. The *ménu* was everything that a Homburg *ménu* could, and should, be; the company were *crème de la crème*; but the crafty Baronet realised that this kind of entertainment afforded no opportunities to advance his schemes. He and Malcolm might as well have dined at their own hostelry—save that in that case, they would have been obliged to pay for their food.

A long table, carefully screened from public gaze, was decorated with a profusion of roses and silver; the company were smart, and Madame herself was magnificent in black and gold, with touches of crimson—her natural taste was for the primary colours, and many jewels, but this weakness was sternly repressed by a strong-willed French maid.

The hostess was supported by a titled guest on either hand, ate a hearty (and extremely unwholesome) meal, and enjoyed herself prodigiously. Sir Horace sat beside a talkative, elderly dame, a neighbour entirely after his own heart. They were in the same set, and exchanged quotations from letters, highly spiced morsels of gossip, and nodded and cackled, as they consumed various delicacies, and sipped dry champagne.

Malcolm Haig was by no means so fortunate, for he was placed between a deaf man and a plain dowdy woman. Far, far away, on the opposite side of the table, he espied Miss Chandos—and the Prince—the former was more beautiful than ever without her hat; the wealth of her wonderful hair, exposed in all its glory, made a fitting frame for her brilliant face.

She wore a gown of white lace, with long sleeves, a chain of splendid pearls, and to his romantic imagination seemed the dazzling embodiment of a princess in a fairy tale. The Prince, who was eating little, talked to her incessantly, enforcing his conversation with flashing eyes and quick impassioned gestures.

What was he saying? Malcolm watched and wondered; finally he arrived at the conclusion that he was making love after the most approved Italian mode, and became

sensible of a flaming desire to go round and punch his sleek head.

Poor Allessandro! he really was devoted to the lovely English Signorita. He could not sleep, he would not eat, he chiefly existed on cigarettes and her society—and yet he was a little afraid of his enchantress. She was so fascinating, yet elusive; always charming and gracious, but when he became sentimental she laughed with heartless indifference and brushed all his tender compliments aside. And then she was so rich, Mother of Heaven, what a fortune! With this girl, and her money, his existence would be heaven on earth. Good-bye for ever to insolent creditors, to third-class tickets, shabby clothes and undignified poverty.

“Ah, Verona,” he murmured, “you are called after one of our most beautiful towns; you ought to belong to Italy.”

“Do you think so?” she answered gaily; “then, in that case, you should belong to Turkey!”

“I would ever belong to where *you* were,” he murmured tenderly.

Miss Chandos merely helped herself to a salted almond. She had lovely hands.

“Why were you called Verona?” he pursued.

“I have not the faintest idea. I suppose they thought it more uncommon than Florence!”

“Did you never ask them the reason?” he continued in his soft voice.

“If by ‘them’ you allude to my father and my mother, I am sorry to say I have not even a dim recollection of either.”

“Ah! So you are an orphan?”

She bowed her head.

“How sad! How I pity you!” he ejaculated. “Now I have the good fortune to have a charming father and mother—my mother is a beautiful woman. How much I should like to make you known to her. I assure you she would love you as a—daughter.”

“It is very kind of you to say so, Prince.”

“She lives in a noble old castle. It still retains many splendid pictures and works of art. Perhaps you would visit her there one day? It has such a wonderful view, being high on the top of a mountain—almost in the clouds.”

“Almost a castle in the air?” suggested Verona.

"Yes, yes, it is; and I, too, have my real castle in the air," he added with tremulous significance. "Oh, such an adorable one." This speech was accompanied by a long, intense look.

"Don't you think these castles in the air cost a good deal to keep up?" remarked Miss Chandos. "I cannot afford to build them myself." Then she smiled her sweet smile, and turned away to address her left-hand neighbour.

All this time Malcolm was inwardly fuming, although he was eating his dinner critically and carrying on a conversation with the lady beside him, a lady who was blessed with a copious stock of words and laboured under the delusion that she was a brilliant and dramatic talker. She speedily discovered that her neighbour had been in India, and plied him with opinions, suggestions and numerous questions with regard to native life.

At last utterly wearied by this severe cross-examination, he exclaimed:

"I am truly sorry my information appears so meagre, but the truth is that India—real India—is to the European a closed book!"

"Oh no, surely not!" she protested warmly. "Only stupid, lazy people say so!"

"Well, I have been out in the East seven years, and I know precious little of the natives, although I speak their language. I was born there, too, and sent home as a kid. My father was a judge in the Punjaub for thirty years. Shall I tell you what he said?"

"Oh, pray do!"

"That we Europeans are like drops of oil on a great ocean of water, and will never penetrate or mix!"

"Really! Well, I am afraid I do not share his opinion," declared the listener with a shrug of her round shoulders.

"You have been in the country, of course?"

"No; but I have read about it, which amounts to almost the same thing. Have you seen a book called 'Thrills from the Hills, or The Curse of the Khitmagar'?"

"Yes, as it happens, I have! A fellow on board ship had it, and I looked into it."

"Tell me, how did it strike you?" she demanded, and the lady's key was pitched in the imperative mood.

"As absolutely the greatest drivel and rot I ever read—and that is saying a good deal! It is no more like India

than it's like Homburg! I should say that the author took her facts from fiction, her local colour from Earl's Court, and her grammar from her cook!"

There was an unusually spacious pause. Captain Haig glanced furtively at his companion, and noticed that her face had become alarmingly red. Presently she remarked in a repressed, but throaty voice:

"It is a misfortune that the book fails to meet with your approval. As it happens it was written by my sister," and she turned her head away and gave him a view of nearly the whole of her shoulders.

"Well, what was said was said!" reflected her neighbour, apologies were useless. He tossed off a glass of champagne and settled himself to brazen out the situation until a welcome signal should give him his release.

For a considerable time the culprit was compelled to subsist on disjointed scraps of the adjoining conversations. Among the crumbs he gathered were these: "Fancy going 'no trumps' on such a hand! Wasn't it sickening?"

"Oh—I don't know! He had two aces. It was unlucky he was done in spades."

"A lovely piece of Persian lamb. Just enough for the collar."

"No; a man with a beard never takes on the stage."

"So they got the grand slam!"

"I'm sure the Staal Brunnen would suit you."

"But she is *so dark*—her eyes and hair—you don't think——?" Voice dropped, man's raised in reply, and in the key of D sharp.

"Good heavens, no! What an awful suspicion! Not with that complexion."

Pushing back of chairs, general rising, general exit.

After coffee in the garden the party strolled over to the Casino in order to see the grand fireworks. The grounds were illuminated, and the crowd was immense. The entire scene was delightful, so gay, so exhilarating and so foreign. People of many nations sat about, or promenaded in groups, staring at the brilliant display, and listening to the band.

Some of the members of the late festivity assembled on the terrace, where they paced to and fro, or stood to exclaim at some especially marvellous effect. Miss Chandos was so closely invested by Uhlan officers and other friends that Captain Haig had no opportunity of ex-

changing a word with her. After several frustrated attempts to turn aside, took a seat apart, and, we may as well admit it, sulked! He watched with discontented eyes the gay throng of well-dressed people, the glitter of diamonds, the bright stars overhead, the bright light around. He saw Verona (as he mentally called her) now holding a little court on the terrace, again strolling up and down with an Austrian field-marshal or a Russian grand duke, and he realised how difficult it would be for him to improve their acquaintance, and what a complete outsider he was. There were too many notable worshippers, all competing for a lady's society and favour, and he was but an impecunious officer who must not venture to claim the privilege of sunning himself in the beauty's smiles.

Nevertheless, Captain Haig had some brief visions of Miss Chandos; for instance, at the Elisabeth Well of a morning, at the opera, or at church, now and then they exchanged a few sentences.

At the annual Battle of Flowers—which was attended by all Homburg and Frankfurt—the carriage of Madame de Godez was accorded a coveted banner, and first prize. The landau was entirely covered with pink roses, the very wheels had been transformed into colossal wreaths. Four milk-white horses, caparisoned with roses and silver, were led by grooms wearing pink and silver livery, and white wigs. It was the chariot of a Fairy Queen, and was received with shouts of admiration and pelted with a hurricane of flowers.

Enthroned in the vehicle reclined Madame de Godez, (despite her maid) in a gorgeous pink and silver pelisse, with feathered headgear of the most imposing assumption. ("The blot on the escutcheon," Sir Horace dubbed the lady.) Beside her was seated the Princess, clad in white, her hat crowned with roses; on the coach box was perched Dog Darling, decorated en suite, with an enormous pink bow—glowering at all the world and shivering with shame!

The carriage was crammed with flowers of the most costly varieties, which the two ladies tossed to the crowd with liberal hands.

As the splendid equipage rolled majestically between dense masses of admiring spectators it seemed to represent the triumphal car of Beauty and Mammon.

Captain Haig, posted in a coign of vantage, pelted the

occupants with the best of his assortment. He had no eyes, or flowers, for others, not even for the cart laden with sheaves of corn and pretty girls and drawn by oxen, nor for the gorgeous yellow coach, or yet the charming Japanese; his flowers were only for Verona. Once he had the good fortune to catch her eye, and as she passed she smiled and tossed him a rose. This he kissed with fervour and stowed away as if it were some holy relic, for Malcolm Haig was really in love. So much in love, that he actually attended a charity bazaar in the extravagant and foolish hope of finding *her* within; but unfortunately Miss Chandos was elsewhere, playing golf, and his temerity cost him three sovereigns. His leave was ebbing hourly—his luck was dead out. Sir Horace, too, was selfishly absorbed in his own affairs and the progress of his cure, and had never given his unhappy nephew a helping hand since that first notable morning. At last Fortune smiled! Captain Haig was returning from a sad and solitary ramble in the woods, when to his surprise, and, needless to add, joy, he came upon Miss Chandos and Dog Darling. She was seated on the trunk of a fallen tree with the enviable animal in her lap.

"Oh, this is fortunate!" she exclaimed, "I am in rather a quandary, like the ferryman with the fox and goose and corn. Dog Darling has cut his foot, and I don't know how I am to get him home. I dare not leave him; he might stray, or be stolen, and, much as I love him—I cannot carry him!"

"No, indeed," agreed the delighted lover. "Pray how do you happen to be here all alone?"

"I was driving with Auntie from Nauheim, I got out to walk back the rest of the way, and give Dog Darling a run. He has cut his foot on a broken bottle, poor dear; so wicked of people to leave their picnics loose."

"I see, his poor paw is badly cut," said Malcolm "shall I bandage it up?"

"I shall be most grateful if you will, but I warn you that he *may* bite you!"

"And then you'll have to bandage me! Eh, is it a bargain?"

"I will guarantee to hold his mouth quite firmly, and you can please take my handkerchief."

"No, no; mine is the best," said the impromptu surgeon, and in five minutes the business was successfully accomplished.

"I think he has sense to know that I mean well," said Captain Haig, "now I propose to carry him home; it is not more than a mile."

"But he is so heavy!" objected the young lady. "If you were to go back and send a carriage to fetch us—how would that do?"

Naturally this arrangement did not appeal to her companion, and he replied with a deliberate untruth:

"The patient is a mere feather! You lay him in my arms and I'll do nurse as if to the manner born."

Having effected this amicable arrangement without any contretemps, the pair set off, the young man carrying the dog, who proved to be a dead weight and exceedingly irritable and sorry for himself.

"Where did Madame get him?" asked the bearer abruptly.

"Well, the fact is, he belonged to me originally, and is a native of England," replied the girl. "I lived with a family from the time I was eight till I was seventeen, and enjoyed a delightful country life."

"No lessons—all haymaking, jam and holidays, I presume?"

"Any amount of lessons and governesses. The Melvilles' daughter and I shared them. Auntie paid me flying visits, and on one of the occasions she noticed Toby, a young dog, full of tricks and spirits. He was very nice to her (as he can be when he likes), and she simply insisted on carrying him off."

"Precisely as I am doing."

"Oh no; in a dog-box. It changed his whole career and outlook on life. Instead of living in a barrel, hunting water rats and rabbits, and having a brother in the house, and cousins in the village, he has become a society dog, and a cynical, disappointed person."

"Poor old boy!" exclaimed his nurse, "so he is out of his element, like many of his betters."

From Dog Darling the conversation gradually became more personal, Captain Haig walking as slowly as possible, and occasionally coming to a dead halt, would have gladly carried his burden many miles—for the sake of the dog's mistress. But everything, however agreeable, must end, and the delightful *tête-à-tête* concluded all too soon at the door of Ritter's Hotel. Madame de Godez professed herself to be much touched by Captain Haig's attention to the sweet darling, and, as a suitable reward,

the following evening she invited him to coffee on the Casino Terrace, which invitation he grasped at, since he had now come to his last hours in Homburg. After the coffee had been served Captain Haig and Miss Chandos instinctively, by a sort of mutual consent, descended into the grounds, and strolled there in the moonlight, listening to the superb string band. It happened to be playing "Die Lieben Langen Tag," when Malcolm said:

"Do you know this is my last day here? I'm off to-morrow morning."

"Oh, are you?" she exclaimed, "must you really leave so soon? I am sorry."

"Not a thousandth part as sorry as I am," he responded, with what seemed unnecessary emphasis. "I wonder if we shall ever meet again?"

"I wonder?" she echoed meditatively. "How I should like to see your gorgeous East! but of course I never shall. Please give my love to India!"

"Yes; the instant I sight Colaba light, if you will give me something in return."

"What is it?"

"Your photograph," was the bold reply.

"Oh, but really, I never give that to anyone," she answered rather stiffly.

"In Europe, no. But I am going ten thousand miles away. Do grant me this favour—it will be a talisman to summon happy memories in a foreign land."

"But I know you will stick me in a row with forty other girls," she objected, with a smile.

"I will not," he rejoined, with prompt vehemence, "never—I swear it." A pause, and he reiterated his request. "Will you?" he pleaded, sinking his voice to a half-whisper.

"I will see," she replied, "and now I really must return to auntie and carry her off to bed. I am trying to coax her to keep early hours, and she is as fractious as a little girl of six."

Malcolm Haig having mentally consigned Madame to the bed of the Red Sea, reluctantly turned towards the Casino, and as they passed near some great trees he halted abruptly and said:

"I think, if you don't mind, I'll say good-bye here."

"Why?" she asked quickly. Then, as she glanced at him, noticed in the moonlight that her companion's face was working with some strong emotion, and it

dawned upon her for the first time that Captain Haig was in love with her, and struggling to say, with decent fortitude, farewell for ever

Miss Chandos was startled and not a little sorry, although her own heart was untouched. Auntie need not have been so pointedly careful to exclude Sir Horace's handsome nephew from all her select little parties.

She hesitated for a moment, then murmured "Good-bye" as she held out her hand.

For a second he held it fast; then, suddenly stooping, pressed his lips upon it, and the beautiful princess did not resist. Possibly she was accustomed to such homage!

The following morning, before Captain Haig departed, a large envelope was delivered to him. He opened it with a thumping pulse to discover (as he hoped) the portrait of his lady love.

Certainly it was a beautiful face. The lips and eyes seemed almost to speak. Across one corner was inscribed, in a clear, fine hand, "Verona Chandos."

Captain Haig was occasionally impulsive; he was stirred by impulse now, and seizing a sheet of the hotel paper he sat down immediately and scrawled:—

"DEAR MISS CHANDOS,—

"Thank you for your gracious gift, I prize it above everything I possess. I am, alas! but an humble soldier, and you are the Fairy Princess; should the princess ever need a champion to do battle for her, I pray that she may command till death,

"MALCOLM HAIG."

Malcolm Haig was already nearing Frankfurt, with his cap drawn far over his eyes, and a curious sensation gripping his heart, when Verona received his note. She read it over twice—the first time quickly, the second with a pleased smile—and somewhat to her own surprise, crammed it away among her unanswered letters.

CHAPTER V

MANY months had elapsed since Malcolm Haig bartered his heart in exchange for a photograph; he was once more resigned to the monotonous round of regimental duty in an Indian cantonment, had purchased a promising pony, who ran at small meetings under the mysterious initial of "V. C."—a "V. C." who was gradually absorbing the interest once given to her namesake, and, to tell the plain unvarnished truth, the memory of a certain dazzling princess had become a little dim!

Madame de Godez and Verona were in England. They had no occasion now to dread the Dover Custom House, for Dog Darling was defunct. His death had been a genuine grief to his mistress, who looked as if she too would soon cross the frontier of an unknown land. The old lady was changed, a life of uninterrupted self-indulgence had begun to tell at last. There were deep lines in her face, and pouches under her eyes, her breath was scanty and her spirits were low.

She had come to London in order to consult a specialist, and to confer with her man of business, and for some weeks had been established in the best suite of a well-known private hotel off Piccadilly.

It was a foggy night in March, the lamps across the way were barely discernible, the traffic had almost ceased. In a stately drawing-room, Madame, hunched up in a low chair, was cowering over the fire. As she sat staring into the coals with a far-away, vacant expression, she looked very old, and dark, and sick—despite a splendid satin tea-gown, and the pearl-powder on her face. Verona, her pride and boast, was now transformed from a mere beauty on exhibition to an affectionate and efficient nurse—Madame's unwearied comforter and companion. She had been reading aloud since dinner-time, in a clear steady voice, detailed descriptions of fashionable doings and particulars of a great wedding; such news as the soul of her listener loved, until Madame, who had been inattentive for a long time, suddenly exclaimed in a fretful tone:

"There, there, Verona, child, that will do! Turn off the lights, they hurt my eyes, and come and sit by the fire and talk to me."

"Yes, auntie," she answered, promptly putting aside the paper and lowering the lights, "and now"—taking

one of the old woman's hands in hers and stroking it softly—"tell me, what shall we talk about?"

"I've been thinking of the Prince," was the unexpected answer. "How I wish you had married him! He was a nice fellow, and if he had no money—what matter for that!"

"I could not have married him, dear."

"Why not?"

"Because he was so effeminate, so sentimental, and above all, so dark. Why, he was like a blackamoor!"

"Verona, it is awfuller wicked to talk like that!" cried Madame, with unusual excitement. "What harm is a little black blood to anyone? It is a great sin to be so particular—some of the Saints are ink-black in their pictures. Oh, you may yet be punished for such shocking pride!"

"But, dear darling, it is not pride; it is antipathy. I cannot help it, it is born in me. There were two Western Indian girls at the dancing class, and I could not endure them for partners. I shuddered when our hands met, their touch seemed so boneless and damp."

"I tell you, you may be sorry for this sinful feeling, some day."

"Yes, indeed, auntie. I'm sorry *now*, but I really can't help myself. I am afraid you are very tired, dear," she continued, again stroking the old lady's withered hand, "that lawyer, Mr. Middlemass, absorbs too much time; he was here for nearly an hour this afternoon. What were you doing?"

"I was giving him instructions about my will—he was drawing it up."

"But I thought you had made it ages ago."

"Oh, yes, several wills. The fact is, lovey," and here she placed her hand over Verona's, "I am superstitious. I've always thought it so unlucky to make my will. Yet I've done it, because Mr. Middlemass has been troublesome, and 'dicked' me so, for your sake. Then when I feel ill, I say to myself, oh, it's all because of this horrid old will, and so I will burn it! I have burned three"—there was a distinct note of exultation in the confession—"now I am making," here she heaved a deep sigh, "another."

"I'm sure you are not fit to do law business at present; do wait a little."

"No, I can not; that Middlemass has been scolding

me to-day, and says I ought to settle my affairs, for if I—” she hesitated, and went on—“I were to die, every pice I possess goes to my husband’s relations. And then what would become of you, my dearie?”

“Do not let us talk of such things, auntie. At present I have you, and you are much better.”

“I tell him a rich girl has always friends!” mused Madame, as if talking to herself. “You have numbers of friends, Verona, but most of them are abroad. So are your admirers. I am sorry now I’ve stayed out of England these five years. One is soon forgotten, and loses touch with people. At this time of the year, too, our acquaintances are in the country, or on the Riviera. When I feel arl-right, I shall take a big house in town, and give dances, and bridge parties, and entertain—and *then* my old set will soon remember me.”

There was a silence, during which the two women sat staring at the fire. At last the girl spoke, with the abruptness of one who has made up her mind to broach a strange topic.

“Auntie, I wish you would tell me something about myself. Do, dear auntie! I am two-and-twenty years of age, and I know nothing of what is called my forbears. If anyone were to say to me, ‘Who are you?’ I should be obliged to say, ‘I don’t know!’”

“If you say, ‘I am the adopted daughter and heiress of Fernanda de Godez,’ you will find they are perfectly satisfied,” rejoined her companion, in a sharp, emphatic key.

“But *I* am not.—Oh, do forgive me, dearest, I feel sure that no kith or kin could have done more for me than you, and I am a truly fortunate girl; for it is not money only that you have given me, but love. It does seem so extraordinary, that I have no belongings, and that all I know of my past is that when I was a tiny child, and a year old, you adopted me and brought me home from India.”

“That is true,” granted her listener.

“I must have been over a year old, for I can dimly recall the steamer, and the black faces of the Lascars.”

“Ho, ho! there you go! black faces! You were nearly two when you landed.”

“They must have died within a short time of one another,” resumed Verona, in a low voice.

“What do you mean, child? Who are you talking about?”

“My father and mother.”

"Yes, yes, yes, I have allowed everyone to suppose you were an orphan," continued Madame,, staring straight before her in dreamy fashion, "but I have never said so."

"Not an orphan!" repeated the girl, sitting erect, and turning quickly to her companion. "Oh, darling auntie, do tell me—it will make no difference to you—is my mother alive?"

Her voice shook for an imperceptible moment, and her eyes glowed with expectancy.

"Now, what nonsense this is!" cried Madame de Godez peevishly. "What would you give to know?"

Verona suddenly averted her eager face, and made no answer.

The ensuing silence was so unusually prolonged that at last the old lady jerked her head round, and glanced interrogatively at her companion. To her amazement and dismay she saw two great tears stealing down the girl's face.

Verona's tears were more than she could endure. Verona, who rarely wept, even as a child; Verona, who had scarcely grieved for the dog.

"Come, come, come, lovey, don't! I cannot bear it. No! since you are so foolish, then I will tell you."

The girl turned to her instantly, her eyes were wet, her lips were parted.

"Your father and mother are both alive—in India—and well, for all I know—there now!"

For a moment her listener remained silent and motionless; she seemed stunned; twice she endeavoured to articulate, but failed. At last she said:

"My father and mother! Oh, thank God! Auntie, isn't it wonderful?"

"No-ah! There is nothing wonderful at all," retorted Madame de Godez, "I knew the family. They were hard up, they had debts, and children, and as I was leaving India a widow, alone, I offered to take you to be my own daughter and never to see them again."

"And they agreed?" exclaimed the girl, and her words were faint and tremulous.

"Why, of course. It was a fine bargain for them, and you. Oh, you were a pretty child! Just like a little angel on a Christmas card. Now, Verona, I would never have spoken of this, and let you think what you pleased, only—you have worried it out of me!"

"Are my people related to you?" she faltered.

"Never mind."

"Have I any brothers and sisters?"

"It does not matter, for you will never see them," replied the old lady, who was obviously disturbed and displeased. "You will never go to India, make yourself easy about that."

"Oh, dear auntie," said the girl suddenly, sinking on her knees, and putting both her arms round her friend's dumpy figure, "you know very well that it is not like you to talk in this way. You know that you can make me very happy. You load me with diamonds and pearls, far more than I want; give me a few precious words—they are of more value to me than jewels. Do tell me something about my father, and above all"—with a sudden impulsive movement—"my mother. Do, darling, please." And the petitioner drew the old woman into a yet closer embrace, and imprinted warm kisses on her ugly, lipless mouth.

"Well, then," gasped Madame, a little breathlessly, "you are such a coax! I suppose I must! Your father is a gentleman, of old, old family—he looks like a duke. He was in the Army long ago, but he was hard up, and so he had to leave. He has now a civil post."

"And my mother?" Verona's lips dwelt lingeringly on the word; there was a strange expression in her eye.

"Oh, no, no! She is not much! She is not a friend of mine. No, no, I do not like her; but she was once a beauty. Now, Verona," suddenly releasing herself, "that is enough. No, but too much. Be satisfied. I am your father and mother, and sisters and brothers. They are Indian people, with Indian notions, and they do not want you. You are not one of them—and never can be one of them."

"No," agreed her hearer, half under her breath. "Gains involve losses"—the saying flashed into her mind with cruel opportuneness, and Verona realised with a pang that she had gained a life of luxurious ease, in exchange for her own people and her father's house.

"Oh, no, no, no, they do not want you," reiterated Madame, "'the flower returns not to the branch,' as Baptista Lopez would say; she and I were at school together. My! what a girl for proverbs!"

"Do they ever write?" ventured Verona.

"There, now, you see what I have put into your head!" cried Madame angrily. "I am sorry I told you one single

word; it is all useless, foolish talk. I am tired. Ring for Pauline, and I will go to my bed." As she spoke she rose from her chair with Verona's assistance, then grasped her arm, and tottered painfully out of the room.

Madame's adopted daughter had led a wandering life, until she was eight years old, and was supremely ignorant of what the word "home" implied. Madame had surely some gipsy blood in her veins (and was not averse to the idea). She drifted about the Continent from one fashionable hotel to another, with a retinue of servants, tons of luggage, a parrot, a poodle, and a child.

This was all very well for the parrot and the poodle, but for the child it was another affair. Her education was of a peculiar description, and undoubtedly resembled a meal, where the sweets are served before the joints. "La petite Verona," danced delightfully, acted with extraordinary intelligence, and sang piquant little songs in her shrill childish voice—such were her accomplishments. She was dainty, and pretty, and graceful; in short, she was Madame de Godez's doll—and idol. But, low be it whispered, she could hardly read simple words, a pen and needle were strangers to her tiny hands; geography and arithmetic were but hideous names, and yet the child could declaim a tragedy, play the mandoline, and converse fluently in three languages.

It seemed a sheer miracle that this petted little creature should have remained unspoiled, but her sense of truth and honour appeared to be inborn and innate, and she had none of the greedy, selfish, elfish ways of solitary and applauded children. In short, her little heart was in its right place, her feelings were deep and sincere. She was attached to her *bonne*, her auntie, and the parrot; to one of the waiters at the Hotel Bristol and to Martin, the *conciërge* at "the Ambassadors" in Rome. But she and Polo, the poodle, had never really fraternised, being performers, public favourites, and—necessarily—rivals.

The child was by no means perfect. Her temper was hot, and it must be frankly admitted that her manner to those she considered her inferiors was occasionally haughty and disdainful; her pride was stern and unbending, for, although she had no petty conceit, she took the per-

sonality of Miss Verona Chandos with a gravity that was ludicrous.

A sudden and complete change in the child's life may be attributed to one cause, and the name of that cause was, "scarlatina." She caught the complaint, and had it badly, thereby occasioned a serious commotion, as well as much inconvenience, in a certain smart hotel, and subsequent heavy expense to her auntie. A soft-voiced, dove-eyed matron pointed out to this lady that a girl of Verona's age had still a whole gamut of diseases to run through—measles, mumps, whooping cough—this would necessarily lead to continual annoyance, quarantine, and enforced seclusion.

"But *what* am I to do?" demanded Madame in her staccato key.

"Send her to England without delay. It is fully time she was properly educated, and mixed with other children."

"Oh, but she is so clever!"

"True, in a way, but she cannot read or write. Surely, dear friend, you do not wish Verona to grow up an ignoramus and a laughing-stock?"

"No, no, no," ejaculated Madame, "but I could not send her to school. I hated school myself."

Lady Wallsend stared; it seemed such a singular and grotesque idea that Madame de Godez should ever have been at school.

"And I happen to know a most charming family in England—extremely kind, refined, and well connected. They are looking for a companion, to educate with their little girl Madge."

"Oh, do you think that would answer?"

"Yes, quite admirably. The Melvilles are my own cousins—not wealthy. They would, of course, expect handsome terms, and for these, the child would have every care, the best of teachers, a delightful country home, and a playmate of her own age."

Madame, who was still smarting from exorbitant charges, and penetrated with the dread of measles and chicken-pox, lent a ready ear to Lady Wallsend's not wholly disinterested suggestion; preliminaries were arranged, and Verona Chandos, a Frenchified, dressy self-possessed little personage, was duly received at Halstead Manor. Here she lived as one of the family for nine happy years, sharing all the joys and sorrows,

games and lessons, of her friend Madge; and being an orphan, was from the first adopted into the motherly heart of Mrs. Melville.

Madame de Godez did not lose sight of her *protégée*. During the London season she travelled to England, and carried off Verona for a sensational holiday; but when the girl was seventeen, and gave promise of remarkable beauty, her adopted mother promptly claimed her, loudly announcing that "life was no longer possible without her adored child." Here was the first serious trouble in Verona's life. She felt almost heartbroken as she and Madge went round, arm in arm, paying farewell visits in the village, the stable yard—not forgetting the seagull, and the tortoise in the garden. Their tears flowed fast as they separated their respective treasures in the old schoolroom, but Madame de Godez laughed at their sorrows, and believed that she had stifled every regret when she presented each of the mourners with a fine pearl necklace.

In spite of Madame's mock sympathy and real pearls, Verona found it a painful wrench to bid good-bye to her beloved country home, with all its happy associations, and to go forth into the blare and glare of the great world, and the fierce white light which beats upon a beauty, and an heiress.

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When Verona had assisted Pauline to put her mistress to bed—a lengthy and intricate process—when she had put everything in the way of salts, lozenges, and refreshment, within the patient's reach, lit a night-lamp and turned off the electric light, she returned to the drawing-room and sat down before the fire. Here she remained in one thoughtful attitude for a long time. As she leant her cheek on her hand, the fireplace on the wall made a clear-cut silhouette of her graceful, motionless figure.

As the girl sat thus, she was staring, not at the coals, but into the dim past, yearning to recall some face, urging her torpid memory to send her even one sign. But, strive as she would, all that emerged from the veil which concealed those far-away days was a little painted toy! A wooden figure with a yellow turban, and a scarlet body covered with gold spots. She remembered it perfectly, her anguish when it had fallen overboard, and how she had wept. It was marvellous that such a paltry item

should remain fixed in a child's brain, and that yet she could not recall the face of her parents. No, as far as they were concerned, her memory was a hopeless blank.

Her heart was full to bursting, her thoughts were moving and strange. At last she sprang up and began to pace the room, with subdued silken rustlings and a quick light tread.

Once she stood still and, stretching her arms to the irresponsive London fog, whispered in tones of the most exquisite tenderness, "Oh, mother, mother, mother!"

CHAPTER VI

THE morning after this unusual conversation Verona awoke with the sensation that something extraordinary had happened; awoke to a vague sense of disaster—a loss of something out of her life, a loss of birthright and inheritance; and in spite of an imperious voice which clamoured in her ear of auntie's affection and indulgence, she was aware of a feeling of dissatisfaction and disquiet. Instead of rising as usual when her maid brought her bath and tea, she lay for a long, long time, staring vacantly at the wall-paper and entertaining a succession of unfamiliar thoughts. She was endeavouring to become acquainted with the personal meaning of the strange words father, mother, brother, sister, and home.

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There was a sudden improvement in the weather, a capricious change which flooded the city with sunshine; bright blue skies stared down upon the leafless parks and hinted at approaching Spring.

Madame de Godez, who was painfully sensitive to climate, and constantly referred to herself as "a true child of the sun," now declared that she felt much better—almost well; and instead of cowering over the coals, with her head enveloped in a shawl, her feet encased in fur slippers, she roused up, made a toilet, ordered a carriage, and drove about to milliners, house agents and restaurants. "The child of the sun" was no longer a shivering, ailing old woman, but the bustling and jaunty Madame de Godez of former days. The transformation was astounding; she angrily refused to follow the doctor's orders, flouted the idea of a *régime*, and her appetite for the pleasures of the table and the pleasures of society was, if anything, keener than ever.

The convalescent, in spite of eloquent expostulations, returned to her favourite *ménù* of spiced meats, rich *entrées*, champagne, and caviare, and boastfully assured her adopted daughter that "she was the best judge of her own health. London doctors were quacks and alarmists, and all she required was a complete change; a couple of weeks at Brighton would transform her into another woman." Madame was self-willed and strong. For

twenty-three years no one had ventured to oppose her, and for some little time her own prescription—to eat and drink and make merry—seemed unexpectedly efficacious.

One afternoon, after enjoying a hearty lunch on prawn curry (with hot condiments), roast hare, plum cake, and bottled stout, she sat down to write to a house agent, and when in the act of signing her name, was seized with an apoplectic fit, and before a doctor could be summoned, became insensible, never recovered consciousness, and died that night. Thus Madame de Godez had experienced a change, and one that she little anticipated—the great change of all.

There was the usual amount of startled confusion succeeding a sudden death. Verona was shocked and grief-stricken; all Madame's little peculiarities were forgotten, her good qualities remembered, as she gazed through her tears on the still, dark face, contrasting so sharply with the sheets and pillows, and clothed in all the dignity of death.

Mr. Middlemass, a wooden-faced family lawyer, was soon on the spot, and undertook all correspondence and funeral arrangements. Verona's good friend, Mrs. Melville, hurried up to town at once, in order to be with her, and she proved a comfort and tower of strength. Soon after her arrival Mrs. Melville had a long conversation with Mr. Middlemass, who said to her with alarming gravity, "I am sorry to inform you that Madame de Godez has not signed her will."

"Oh!" exclaimed the lady, rather blankly. "Has she not?"

"No. I have urged her repeatedly to settle her affairs, in common justice to Miss Chandos. She intended her to succeed to almost all she possessed. I have drawn up her instructions. This is the fourth will I have executed; the former three she destroyed. I had it prepared and ready for her signature, but she postponed the appointment, day after day, and now"—throwing out his hands—"she is gone—"

"Then it will make a great difference to Miss Chandos?"

"The greatest in the world. If the will had been duly signed—just two words written—Miss Chandos would come in for fifteen thousand a year—she would be an heiress. Now she is, I may say, penniless. It's one of the worst cases of procrastination I've ever known."

"And what becomes of all the money?" asked Mrs. Melville.

"It goes to the next-of-kin—the Gowdys. They can claim everything, under Mr. Gowdy's will, which states that, if his wife died intestate, his fortune was to go to his brother and his children, the heirs at law."

"And who are they?" she enquired, after a pause.

"Scotch farmer folk. I understand they have deeply resented the fact that the whole of their uncle's estate was left to his widow. James Gowdy was an indigo planter in the big days, and spent forty years in India. Madame disliked the name of Gowdy and transformed it into De Godez; it pleased her, and did no one any harm. Of course her business papers are signed in her real name."

"This is terrible news for my poor young friend," exclaimed Mrs. Melville. "Then she has no claim, and was no relation to her mother by adoption?"

"No more than I was."

"And is left penniless?"

"Yes, as far as Madame's money is concerned. Of course, the Gowdys may do something. I shall bring the matter strongly to their notice, and urge them to be liberal. I have wired, and written, and requested them to come down immediately, and I have postponed the funeral until their arrival."

"Well, I must go and break all this bad news to my poor child," said Mrs. Melville. "You know she is almost like one of my own; it is dreadful to think of her being left alone in the world."

"Oh, there you are misinformed. She is not an orphan, as has been generally supposed. Her father and mother are alive out in India. Madame adopted her, and cut her off from her family; she allowed no correspondence, as she was exceedingly jealous of the girl's affections. Now, no doubt, Miss Chandos will return to her family."

"With all the ideas, refinements, tastes and habits of a girl who has been brought up in England on an income of thousands. How cruel!"

"Yes, but from what I know of Miss Chandos, her tastes appear to be simple, and her ideas are not extravagant. I think she will adapt herself to circumstances. She seems a sensible girl."

"All you say is perfectly true, Mr. Middlemass. She

lived with us for nine years. Her own people are not rich, I gather?"

"No, very far from it."

"And is she to have nothing? Nothing whatever?"

"Her personal effects, clothes and jewellery—that is all that she can claim, by the letter of the law."

"How inhuman the law is! I really think Madame has behaved in the most shameful, selfish way. What a cruel old woman!"

"Only a superstitious old woman," amended Mr. Middlemas, "who believed that a will was a reminder to the Angel of Death. She would be more heartbroken than anyone, at the present state of affairs, and she could not bear the name of the Gowdys. You may be satisfied that I will do my utmost to secure some provision for Miss Chandos." And with this friendly assurance Mr. Middlemass took his grey suède gloves, his glossy hat, and his departure.

CHAPTER VII

MISTRESS JEAN GOWDY was the tenant of a sheep farm on a moor, north of Perth, where by rigorous economy and unwearied industry she and her two sons and daughter contrived to make the rent, to live frugally, and to put by a bit.

Jean was a hale, active woman of sixty, with a fine handsome face, but no figure to speak of—a hard-headed, hard-working, God-fearing Scotch woman.

She had not married over young, but was five-and-thirty years of age, a sensible and settled person, when she bestowed herself and her savings on Andy Gowdy, a small farmer body, with a little money, and a keen desire to better his position.

The couple had taken a long lease of Ardnashiel sheep farm, because being twenty miles from a railway it was cheap; there was plenty of water, fair grazing, and a comfortable stone house on the moor. Here for several years they struggled on bravely, through terrible winters and wet springs, and were at last beginning "to see their way." Unhappily, one dark morning, when the river was coming down in spate, Andy, in endeavouring to ford it, with his horse and cart, was drowned. The fierce mountain torrent turned over the cart, amidst the boulder stones, as if it were a child's toy, and despite the desperate struggles of the fine young horse to effect a landing, he and his master were swept away to their death.

The body of Andy was recovered three miles down the glen. There was loud lamentation for him among the neighbouring farmers and shepherds, and a great concourse from afar attended the funeral, when he was buried in an almost forgotten churchyard among the hills. The loss of a fine young horse, the marks of whose frantic hoofs were imprinted on the banks for years, was almost equally deplored. He had lately cost thirty pounds in Perth, and the tragedy was never related without due mention of his fate.

And Gowdy was drowned, and his widow Jean reigned in his stead. The poor woman found it no easy matter to carry on the farm, and to give her children a bit of schooling; what with minding the bairns, the housework, and the sheep, she was often on the point of breaking

down under her burden, and it is a fact that only for the exertions of three notable collie dogs they might almost have starved. But Jean Gowdy, a woman of true Highland tenacity and indomitable courage, struggled on bravely. Her children thrive, thanks to the keen mountain air and the good porridge and milk. The boys, Andrew and Jock, were now able-bodied men, and Maggie, their sister, was a fine sonsie lassie of two-and-twenty. She had received some sort of education, for their mother had sent them by turns to an aunt in Stirling, and they were all great readers—what else was there to do in the long winter nights? even when their mother drove them to bed at eight o'clock and reminded them that their grandmother, who talked only Gaelic, had always retired at dark. But these were different days, they declared, and no Scotch folk would now consent to pass three-quarters of their time in bed—in order to save lamp oil!

Oh, those winter nights! when the wind swept down through the glen, and they could hear the starving deer stamping outside in the snow and dragging at the wood stack. On these occasions, Mrs. Gowdy knitted stockings, and did curious sums in mental arithmetic; the lads read the paper and such books as they had borrowed from the minister. Jock's shock-haired red head was bent over Adam Smith's "Wealth of Nations." He was clever and ambitious, and had long resolved that *he* was not going to waste his life in herding sheep, milking cows, and dragging up and down the weary road to the town for coal and groceries. No! Jock had heard the history of his uncle Jamie, and he was educating himself with painful, but continuous, effort, in order that he might also go out into the world and do something—something that would bring him in money and applause. To begin with, he was going to the University of Glasgow, and was reading for a bursary. His family tacitly acquiesced; they respected his ambition and agreed that Jock was to be somebody—some day. He was, therefore, allowed the largest share of lamplight and first claim on the ink bottle.

His sister had also her dreams, as she sat with a collie at her feet. Maggie Gowdy hated the hard rough life. It was aye fine for her grandmother, or even her mother; but times were changed; there was no fun or stir beyond a rare jaunt to Stirling or Glasgow. All the other girls in the glen were a thousand times better off than she was. It was easy for her mother to say "bide a wee"; she might

bide at Ardnashiel till she was old and toothless. Young Campbell of Lussie used to come up the valley, by way of fishing, and spier for her, and have a crack, but her mother found it out, and made an awful row, and threatened to lock her in her room. The kirk was full six miles away, and a desperate rough walk, and there was no one there foreby some old shepherds, their wives, and a few farming folk. Aye, when she read beautiful stories in the paper penny books she bought with her knitting profits, she felt wild to be away in the big world, to see people—and be seen. She had overheard Mrs. Murray tell her mother that it was an awful pity such a bonnie lass should be shut away up the glen. Maggie was a tall, broad-shouldered young woman, with a pair of fine bold eyes, a fresh complexion and ropes of coarse dark hair, and felt perfectly confident that, if she only had a bit of money, she would get a match.

Mrs. Gowdy, too, had her own schemes and wishes. She was surely and secretly putting by money, and intended Maggie to marry a minister, and if Jock went out in the world, and Andy took a wife, she had made up her mind to end her days in Glasgow, and in peace; leaving the young ones to carry on the farm. Ardnashiel was paying well; they had only lost five sheep that winter; they were getting good prices; she had no shepherds to pay, and no wages; it was little going out and most coming in. Of course, it was main dull for the bairns, puir bodies, but they were young—and could wait.

The moor surrounding the grim blue-grey home of the Gowdys was celebrated for an historical past, and a certain wild beauty peculiarly its own; the romantic winding glen, guarded by steep mountains, was watered by a capricious and picturesque river, which received many tributaries. A rough cart track connected the glen with a high road, which was seven miles distant, and in winter time the farmers and cotters of Ardnashiel were frequently cut off from the outer world for weeks. No wonder Maggie Gowdy dreaded these dark, dour days, the leaden skies, the vast outlook on snow—snow, nothing but snow. Her heart sank within her when, late in October, she watched the tenants of a neighbouring shooting lodge pass down the rutty tracks, with their servants, and luggage, and dogs—a long and imposing procession. As the last cart turned the corner and was lost to sight, Maggie had known

what it was to rest her head between her knees and sob aloud.

Oh, winter was cruel to all the world, and especially to her; but her mother was a woman of extraordinary force of character, and kept everything going—the lads at the sheep-feeding and their books, and herself at sewing and knitting. Summer and autumn made some amends: the streams ran merrily, the curlew called, the sheep bleated, the swallows and the shooters returned, and the white mountains were clothed in purple. When the day's work was over, the cows milked, the fowls fed, Mrs. Gowdy would repair to her parlour in order to add up her accounts. This was her period of mental refreshment, and if the lambs had sold well, and fleeces were heavy, her heart was light. Jean Gowdy lived meagrely below, in four rooms, a kitchen and three bedrooms. She and Maggie washed at the pump, and shared one bed and a sixpenny looking-glass.

But, like most self-respecting Scots folk, they had a sacred place apart—a parlour, where they received company and entertained the minister. This parlour had been handsomely plenished when Jean had come to the glen a newly-wedded wife. She was proud of it then—she was proud of it still. There was a green and red carpet, good mahogany chairs, and a shiny sofa in horsehair, a variety of framed photographs, two dyed sheepskin rugs, held down unnecessarily in the corners by large foreign shells, some oleographs of Rome and Naples, and a large picture of Queen Victoria; it was here, in a locked bureau, that Mrs. Gowdy kept her business documents, her bank book, and her will. Sitting there in her every-day gown and blue apron, with her bare arms and toil-worn hands, she looked more like a servant who was poking through her mistress's papers than the proprietor of the apartment. These were her moments of delicious relaxation. Her daughter's diversion took the form of a stroll as far as the next farm gate in the faint hope of meeting someone, or else she climbed up to the old churchyard, which commanded a magnificent prospect, and sat on a tombstone, building castles in the air, and railing at her fate. Her thoughts frequently turned to her father's brother Jamie, who, fifty years before, had gone to the East Indies, and got on from one thing to another, had owned hundreds of black men, and, it was even reported, elephants, and had died as rich as a duke, leaving thousands and thousands

to his widow, but not one blessed bawbee to his own folk. Certainly, it was true that her father and Uncle Jamie had had high words and a bitter quarrel before he sailed, folks said, over a five-shilling piece, but they might be wrong. Anyhow, her mother allowed they had no good will to one another; but that was an old story, and she and her brothers were his near kin. He had married a foreign woman, had no family, and had made his home in the Indies, and never once came back to Scotland. His widow had, so they heard, adopted a baby, and brought her up like a princess; and there was she, his own flesh and blood, living on porridge, and working and washing like any common woman. What a scandal!

When Maggie thought of this other girl, set out in silks and jewels, and getting a grand education, and "chances," the blood fairly boiled in her veins. She was far more embittered and furious against this intruder than against her Uncle Jamie, or even his foreign wife. Here was she, Maggie Gowdy, imprisoned and held fast within these glens by poverty and a strong-willed mother, and she, though well enough looking and educated and young, would never have a chance to be anything but a drudge. She dared not throw off her mother's thrall; she had once talked of service, but it was to deaf ears, and here she was, nigh three-and-twenty and, as Jock had cruelly reminded her, "getting past her market." Oh, she felt mad-like—to think of the wasted years!

When Maggie's mind dwelt on these matters and on the remorseless monotony of her life, she felt distracted. She recalled how young Joe Macdonald used to come up the moor, by way of looking for a stray sheep, and how he had appeared at their chapel two Sundays running, and met her once in Perth; and then, all of a sudden, he cooled off, and took up with Allie McCrone, a yellow-haired girl, with a fortune of three-hundred pound! Her mother had said, "Never you mind, my lass, you shall have a fortune, too, as well as Allie. I was up for forty when I got married, but I brought your father four hundred pounds. It went to stock this place, and where we had one sheep then we have a score the noo. You have plenty of time yet—you wait."

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It was late on an April evening in the glen, the snow had melted and swelled the river far above its banks, the

waterfalls were pouring down the hillsides, the small burns were noisy and boisterous, and Andy Gowdy, who had been to the town with the cart for coal and a bag of flour, was not sorry when he came to the last gate of all. As soon as he had "loused" the pony, he carried into the kitchen a sack of flour, a small parcel of tea and sugar, and a letter. This he brought to his mother, who was frying something over the fire.

"There's a letter for you," he drawled.

"Leave it there—it can bide. It's about the sheep wash and tar."

"I'm no so sure of that, it looks out of the ordinary, and the postmark is London."

"Laud sakes—it's for the keeper above."

"Nay, it's for Mrs. Andy Gowdy, Ardnashiel."

"Then give it here. No, my hands is black—you read it, Andy."

Andy at once opened the letter, and began

"LINCOLN'S INN FIELDS."

"Aye, didn't I tell ye it was about the farm!" interrupted his mother.

"No—no—listen here—to what it says," rejoined Andy with heightened colour.

"MADAM,—I have to acquaint you with the sudden death of Mrs. James Gowdy, which took place yesterday at the Beaufort Hotel in Dover Street, Piccadilly. I am her solicitor, and aware that her will, though drawn up, is unsigned. Therefore, I believe, the fortune of her late husband devolves upon his next-of-kin, who I assume to be your children. I am making all arrangements for the funeral, which I propose should take place at Kensal Green on April 30. I fixed this date presuming that you and members of your family will be present. Kindly write instructions at once, or telegraph. Miss Chandos, Mrs. James Gowdy's adopted daughter, is at present at the Hotel. I beg to add that my firm, having conducted the business of Mrs. Gowdy for twenty years, are conversant with all its details, and we shall be happy to place our experience at your service.

"I remain, Madam,

"Yours faithfully,

"GEORGE MIDDLEMASS.

"To Mrs. Andrew Gowdy."

When Andy had finished reading the foregoing, he drew a long, loud breath and looked around him. There was a dead silence. Mrs. Gowdy straightened her back, and still holding a sausage on a fork, stood staring hard at her son. Then she turned about, and snatching the pan off the fire, exclaimed:

"Well! to think of that! Losh me! It's ten thousand a year coming among ye. It's hard to credit!"

Maggie, who had been washing rubbers in the scullery, stood in the doorway with cold wet arms and crimson cheeks and eyes like two flames.

"What shall we do?" she asked hysterically. "What shall we do?"

"First of all, thank God," rejoined her pious mother, "and then have a bit of supper before we begin to talk and make plans."

"I could not taste a mite!" cried Maggie, in a strange hoarse voice, "let us talk now, if we ever talked. We are not dumb beasts. Let the supper bide."

Mrs. Gowdy gazed at her daughter fixedly. The mere name of money had transformed the girl into another creature; a woman with an imperious countenance and a loud tongue.

"Well, well," she agreed, and she sat down and stared out of the window reflectively, whilst her children stood around in a dazed silence, momentarily speechless.

"We mun go to London in the morn," announced Mrs. Gowdy at last. "I see that plain. This is Thursday, and the letter has lain two days. Jock, the pony, canna stir to-morrow; you mun run over and borrow Duncan's bay horse, and bring it back with you. We will start at day-break, there's no call to be keeping the good money waiting, and we will just take a few bits of things and my papers. I have a ten-pound note above in my desk. Andy and Maggie will come with me, and you, Jock, mun mind the place."

"No, no, I'm not for agreeing to that," rejoined Jock, sullenly. "Why should I stay behind more than Andy or Mag. Have I no share in the fortune? I'm going!"

Here were a son and daughter defying her authority for the first time in their lives. And being a prudent and far-seeing woman, Mrs. Gowdy instantly realised that she was no longer dealing with children and dependents, subject to her thrall, but with the heirs of Jamie Gowdy's fortune, who, should she stand in their way, would cut

themselves loose from her control. So much for money. In less than ten minutes it had occasioned a domestic revolution.

"Well, then, have yer way," she agreed. "I'm thinking of who's to mind the cows and the chickens—forby the sheep. You might cry in to Alec Macnab on yer way for the horse, and ask him and his son to give a look to the place, and he'll need to be here at streak of day. I'll make it worth their while. I'll give him a good fee."

"All right," agreed Jock, "I'll bring Alec back with me."

"Aye, and don't let on but what we are going to Glasgow on a bit of family business. No use giving out the news before we are well up in it ourselves."

"Aye, I'll mind that."

"Oh, won't the Flemings be wild," cried Maggie, "when they know it. Ten thousand a year—and maybe more! Ten thousand a year!" As she spoke, she hammered on the table with her wet red hands.

"Now go off like a good lad," urged Mrs. Gowdy to her son, "and bring over Alec and the bay horse. Mind ye, the train leaves the junction at ten o'clock the morn."

There was little sleep for anyone in Ardnashiel that night, and sunrise saw Jean Gowdy and her bairns clad in their Sunday clothes, driving through the dew-soaked glen, *en route* to establish their claim to a fortune.

CHAPTER VIII

THE Gowdy family were jogging slowly down the valley, which looked brilliant in the early morning. The impetuous river raced alongside its companion, a steady, rutty road, twisting and swirling, foaming and flashing, rippling under rowan-beeches and tossing between great boulders its white locks on high. Maggie and the river had one impulse in common: they were both eager to escape from the glen; one drawn by the world—the other by the sea. Halfway to the highway the party encountered a boy with a telegram in his hand, which he held up as he announced:

“It’s for Mrs. Gowdy.”

A horrible idea instantly occurred to the four travellers—it might contain something to put an end to their prospects! Telegrams in their experience invariably brought tidings of ruin, accidents or death.

“Give it here,” cried Mrs. Gowdy in a hoarse key.

“There’ll be six shillings to pay!”

“Yer daft!” screamed the thrifty matron, “yer telling a lee.”

“It’s no lee—it’s the post-office, and I came awa’ at six this morning. If yer going yonder ye can ask. But ye mun pay me the noo.”

“Then giv it to me,” said Mrs. Gowdy, and with tremulous fingers she tore open the envelope and read aloud:

“Hope you received letter respecting Mrs. James Gowdy’s death and are coming to London immediately. Telegraph reply.—MIDDLEMASS.”

“Oh, well”—with a sigh of relief—“so it’s all right. But sax shillings—to think of it!” and to tell the truth, for the remainder of the drive (such is the force of habit), those poor six shillings had a more prominent position in Jean Gowdy’s thoughts than the splendid prospect of thousands of pounds.

The very next forenoon a four-wheeled cab drove up to the office of Middlemass and Son, and from it descended the Gowdy party—who, after a long and protracted altercation with the cabman dismissed him routed and

grumbling, and then proceeded to enter the office, and present themselves to their man of business.

The widow in her decent black, her sons, with clever Scotch faces and the hands of hard-working men—clad in homespun and embarrassment, the daughter gay and complacent, with sparkling eyes and red cheeks, arrayed in a sailor hat and a gown of hunting tartan. Yes, they had all come with one consent to enter on their inheritance. Their papers were duly produced, and found to be in order—marriage and baptismal certificates had been registered in proper form, but the family were not prepared for the law's delays, and certain irritating formalities which must ensue before they could seize upon the Gowdy fortune. Mr. Middlemass soon realised that in Mrs. Andy Gowdy he had to deal with a sharp and capable woman of business. Her mind was clear; her questions were to the point, and she soon laid bare the fact that Miss Chandos was, to all purposes, now living luxuriously in a grand hotel, at their expense!

"She will, of course, leave after the funeral to-morrow," explained the attorney in a tone of apology, "I believe the suite was taken by the week."

For the Gowdys themselves, rooms were engaged at a temperance hotel—a sum of money was advanced for present expenses and mourning, and that night, for the first time in their lives, they dined under the glare of electric light, and were waited upon by brisk Germans.

The funeral of Madame de Godez was a pitiful affair for a woman who had such an immense circle of notable friends. There were only three mourning coaches, three private carriages, and about a dozen cheap wreaths.

The heirs-at-law occupied the first coach (and had never before driven behind a pair of horses). Verona and Mrs. Melville occupied the second vehicle, the doctor and man of business the third; the private carriages were empty!

At the cemetery the Gowdys for the first time beheld Miss Chandos. She was tall, and wore a long, black veil, and really appeared to be in grief!

They stood at opposite sides of the open grave—the penniless adopted daughter, with her air of refinement and delicate breeding, and the rough-looking farmer folk who were now so wealthy. The same afternoon Mrs. Gowdy and her family made a formal call upon the girl they had so unexpectedly supplanted, and were shown into a

luxurious sitting-room, for which, whilst they waited, Maggie remarked, "they were paying good money."

In a few minutes Miss Chandos entered, unveiled. Her personality was so striking that Mrs. Gowdy so far forgot herself as to stand up and drop a half-curtsey, but Maggie never moved, merely sat and stared impassively. What was it, she wondered, that made this girl so different to herself? Her low voice, her long white throat, the delicacy of her hands, the natural dignity of her movements! Miss Chandos had something that she could never possess, and that never could be taken from her! Maggie realised the fact, with an increasing degree of stolid hatred.

"It is very kind of you to come and see me, Mrs. Gowdy," said the girl gently.

"Oh, well, we thought we would just call for you, as we are idle folk the noo—and see what like ye wer! It will be a sore change for ye, I'm thinking," she added.

"Yes, it was very sudden."

"And she made no will—nor left you a penny piece."

"No; but she meant to do so."

"There's justice in the Lord's sight!" declared this daughter of the Covenanters with a lifted hand, "and He cut her off before she could will the whole of my children's heritage to a stranger!"

This was not a gracious speech. Her listener coloured vividly, but made no reply.

"I'm real sorry for you, but you have had a good day and a fine education, and I suppose ye have gran' acquaintance?"

"Yes, I have some friends."

"And ye have plans, maybe?"

"Yes; I shall remain with Mrs. Melville for a time, and then join my own family in India."

"Oh, so you are an Indian!" exclaimed Mrs. Gowdy.

"Well, to think of that, now, and you so fair! Mrs. James, I've always heard, was awfu' swarthy."

"My parents are English. I was brought home when I was quite small."

"Aye, aye; so ye were," assented her visitor. "I mind it all. Mr. Middlemas has been talking to me, and he wants us to make you an allowance. But you have your own folk, and I see no call to that!" Verona was about to speak. "Whist, now," interrupted her visitor, "of course your clothes and jewels and presents are your own." Then she paused and added: "Mrs. James Gowdy had

gran' gowns and laces and diamonds, and her belongings will be coming to *me*." Verona assented with a bow. "I've agreed to pay your passage out, and give you three hundred pounds."

Verona could not immediately trust her voice. She would have rejoiced to decline this liberal charity, but was keenly aware that it would be her sole means of joining her parents.

Should she refuse the dole? "No," urged common-sense, "accept the crumb." And again she bowed in acquiescence.

Maggie, who had never once opened her lips, sat glowering at this English girl with a gaze of hard enmity, endeavouring to impress on her memory her manner of doing her hair, of moving, speaking and looking. Yes, she might for all the world be some great lady, and yet she was nothing but a beggar, on whom her mother had just bestowed a fortune.

"And now I think we must be going," said Mrs. Gowdy, as she rose stiffly, shook out her gown, and offered a large, black-gloved member, the fingers of which were at least an inch too long.

Jean Gowdy was a kind-hearted, motherly soul, and as she held Verona's hand she squeezed it and said:

"Good-bye, miss; I know it's an awful come-down for you, and an uprise for *us*. You have a lucky face, and I wish you well."

Maggie merely bestowed a quick nod of condescension, the two men a couple of admiring stares as they shuffled out of the room in the wake of their womenfolk.

Exit the Gowdys! Their accession to wealth, their sudden emergence from obscurity to social prominence, the success of Jock and the marriage of Maggie would fill a volume, and this history is exclusively concerned with the affairs and fortunes of another family.

CHAPTER IX

HER clothes and personal possessions—such as music, books (and [last, but not least] jewels)—were all that the deposed heiress carried away, when she left London with Mrs. Melville. The entire wardrobe of the late Madame de Godez was confiscated by her sister-in-law, who subsequently made a brave display in various gorgeous garments; whilst Maggie, in a red “creation,” by Worth, was a sight for men, and gods! Oh, the purchaser of these superb confections little, little dreamt who was to flaunt in her plumes and to stand in her shoes!

Miss Chandos experienced the first effects of her change of circumstances when she travelled down to Halstead second class, looked after the luggage and secured seats, whilst her friend took the tickets and paid the cabman.

Her reception at the Manor was warm; from the old coachman’s “Welcome back, miss,” to the parrot’s screech, “Verona, kiss me!” She once more occupied her own bedroom, in which nothing had been changed since she quitted it, five years previously, in order to follow her adopted mother into fashionable life. Here were the same old samplers, the paintings of Venice and Vesuvius, the dimity curtains in the windows, the hideous china dogs on the mantelpiece, the well-known writing table and cosy armchair. There was the same familiar bright outlook on the garden—and the unfamiliar quiet of the country. It was like returning into harbour after an extensive cruise, in order to refit for yet another voyage. She was about to refit and make a fresh departure; to begin life with her own people; to visit long-desired India!

The years with Madame de Godez had flashed by in a succession of splendid scenes, and kaleidoscopic views of strange countries, and strange faces. Now it all seemed singularly unreal. And when Verona sat in the bow window of the drawing-room, and watched the brown pony grazing on the lawn—saw the spaniel chasing his mortal enemy, the kitchen cat, out of the garden, whilst the jackdaw flapped applause—it seemed as if she had only been absent a few weeks. Those glittering scenes at Monte Carlo, and Aix, and Paris, were all so many dreams—merely dreams! Her old friends and neighbours, the folk in the village, were delighted to welcome her back

among them, the only change she felt was the absence of Madge—who six months previously had married an officer and departed to Malta. Verona was thankful that in her day of prosperity she had had it in her power to delight Madge with diamonds. Auntie had been generous, and had bestowed on the bride a set of superb sables.

Now she could no longer indulge in what had been one of her chief pleasures—buying gifts. There was her own jewel case; she unlocked it and exhibited the contents to Mrs. Melville. It contained various proofs of Madame's wealth, and eye for effect. A long chain of pearls, a variety of rings and bangles, brooches, a watch set in brilliants, and several ornaments, including a magnificent diamond bow for the hair or corsage.

"Well, no, you take my advice, you will not sell them," counselled Mrs. Melville. "They are worth a great deal of money, and if you must part with them, I believe you could get a better price in India; some native nobleman might purchase the pearls. Of course, dear, if you like to dispose of them here, and invest the money, do; but I expect you will only get half of what they are really worth. You say the pearls cost nine hundred?"

"Yes, and auntie was always begging me to have diamonds, and rubies, and emeralds, but I always said "No." Even as it was I had far too much jewellery. This diamond and emerald pendant is exquisite—is it not?" and she held it up to her throat.

"It is; and I wish, since this represents your entire fortune, you had accepted madame's offer; for after all you have not such a wonderful supply!"

"More than ample—to wear, or to sell—and I will take your advice and keep them. I—I should like"—here she lowered her voice and coloured a little—"my mother to have the diamonds."

And with this generous wish she closed the jewel case.

Verona had written to her mother immediately after the death of Madame de Godez. Mr. Middlemass informed her of her address (and he had also despatched a few lines on his own behalf).

Her letter said:

"MY DEAR MOTHER,

"I cannot tell you with what intense happiness I write these three words; for until a month ago I believed I was an orphan. My kind adopted mother is dead. She died

most suddenly of apoplexy, and, meaning nothing but love and kindness to me, left her will unsigned, and all she possessed has passed to her husband's next-of-kin—a family of Scotch farmers. These people dislike me because they consider that for many years I have enjoyed their uncle's money. They have taken possession of everything, but intend to defray my passage out to India, and give me three hundred pounds. I have no ties in this country, and am longing to go to my own people. Amidst much trouble and worry, and a great change of circumstances, I have one indescribable joy, the prospect of soon seeing my father, and *you*. Madame de Godez had, until a month ago, kept me entirely in the dark respecting my birth and parentage. I was her child, and no more information would she divulge; but not long ago I tried to break down her reserve, and she informed me with great reluctance, that you and my father were alive, and that I had brothers and sisters. More than this she would not disclose, and never spoke of the subject but once. I gather that my father is not wealthy, but you will find that I can adapt myself to circumstances, and I hope to be a useful addition to the family. I have had an excellent education; I have a strong constitution, and can work hard. I have always wondered why I felt so drawn towards the East, but *now* I understand at last. I am staying with Mrs. Melville at Halstead Manor, where I once lived for nine years, it was here I was educated and brought up. I would start off at once, so anxious am I to see you, but Mrs. Melville advises me to wait for a reply to this letter, and also until the monsoon has broken. She suggests my leaving England in July. Dearest mother, I am counting the very days till we meet. You will spare a little love for me, will you not? I am always picturing you to myself, and I have made up my mind that you are like someone I know, and who I have always *wished* were my mother.

“Ever your most loving and happy daughter,

“VERONA CHANDOS.”

It would take (so she had calculated) about five weeks to receive an answer to this letter, and during these five weeks Verona renewed her friendship with people and animals: became a delightful deputy daughter to Mr. and Mrs. Melville, busied herself in making preparations for her passage, and buying suitable gifts for her unknown relations. It was near the end of June, when a letter, with an

Indian stamp, in an unknown, somewhat shaky writing, lay beside Verona's plate at breakfast time. She opened it tremulously. It was written on cheap thin paper, and at the top was stamped.

"MANOR SUGAR FACTORY,
"NEAR RAJAHPORE."

"DEAR VERONA,

"I am writing in reply to your letter, to assure you that we shall be glad to see you, although we have not much to offer, except a welcome. I fear, after what you have been accustomed to, that you will find our mode of life an uncomfortable change, but you are young and full of hope and courage, and everything will be a novelty.

"I am sorry Madame de Godez is dead, and that she has made no provision for you. At the same time, we shall be pleased to welcome you into what is your real home, and will look for your name in the passenger list of the steamer leaving London the second week in August. Write again, and tell us your plans.

"I am, your affectionate father,
"PAUL CHANDOS."

"P.S.—Your mother sends her love."

This epistle was a little disappointing to Verona, the echo to her appeal seemed so faint, but after all it was a letter from her *father*. They were all ready to welcome her, and if not so eager to see her, as she was to see them, she remembered that they were accustomed to family intercourse—they were many living together—she alone out in the darkness, looked towards their hearth as the beacon of her happiness. Verona reflected for a short time, and then decided to show her father's letter to Mrs. Melville, who for her part found it both kind and sensible, and said so, greatly to Verona's relief, and that same day she wrote and engaged her passage by a steamer which sailed in three weeks' time.

As she went singing about the garden, culling roses, and accompanied by the dogs, Mr. Melville—a good grave man, with a spade-shaped beard, and a taste for archæology—said to his wife—

"Lucy, I wish we could keep that child with us."

"So do I. She has always been one of ourselves, almost ever since she came here, a little decked-out,

Frenchified doll, speaking broken English. But her heart is set upon her own people."

"Yes, and she knows nothing about them, nor, for that matter, do *we*."

"We know that her father is a man of good family—one of the Chandos of Charne."

"And the black sheep for all you can tell," interrupted Mr. Melville.

"Come, don't make the worst of it, Joe!"

"Yes, it's bad enough as it is. This girl, brought up with a taste for everything money can buy, and left without any provision. I call it a most shameful, abominable business. Verona will never understand shifts and scraping. She will have to put up with a vile climate, and to adapt herself to a new life. Now Madge is away, and Robert is at sea, I think she might remain on as our adopted daughter. She does the flowers for you, and mends my gloves, and cuts my papers, and plays picquet, and sends back my books to the London library—we shall not be able to spare her."

"My dear Joe, I'm afraid we must, sorely as we want her, and much as I believe she loves us. Her heart, as I've already assured you, is with her own people. If we kept her with us, she would be continually pining to fly away, like a robin in a cage."

"I sincerely hope her expectations may be realised, but I think it is a risky experiment, attaching oneself to a hitherto unknown family."

"She will be an acquisition anywhere, so lively and so sweet tempered, and entirely unconscious of herself. Her great social success never made the smallest difference to us; she wrote to me as regularly as Madge. I believe she had no end of offers of marriage—including one from a prince!"

"Oh, well, I cannot exactly credit *that*. And anyway, I can assure you, she will never have a chance of becoming a princess in India. Joking apart, I'm really anxious about the child. Do you have a good talk to her, Lucy, and try once more, if she will not accept the bird in the hand, and remain with us, for the birds in the bush may be of doubtful plumage."

"I will see what I can do," assented Mrs. Melville, "but in return for your half proverb, I will give you a whole one."

"What may it be?"

"Far off hills are green."

Joselyn Melville made no attempt to argue the question further but merely resumed the *Guardian* with a grunt.

In three weeks' time Mr. and Mrs. Melville accompanied their charge to Tilbury, and when they saw the *Arabia* leave her moorings, waved good-bye to Verona with as much emotion as if she had been their own child.

CHAPTER X

AT four o'clock in the afternoon the chief event of the day, the Bombay mail, was due at Rajahpore. The railway station was crammed, not merely with passengers, but idlers and loafers, who attended this train in order to see the people who were going North, and to gather jokes, scraps of gossip, and news. Soldiers were present in considerable force, as well as the local police, and numbers of Eurasians and natives, all assembled with the harmless object of enjoying a slight break in the monotony of their existence.

It was on a platform seething with strange faces, strange costumes and a strange nationality that Verona Chandos alighted and looked about her, with a vague, bewildered stare. She glanced hurriedly around in quest of her father, mother and sisters—her own people. Surely they were somewhere among this crowd! Her heart beat in rapid jerks as she noticed a tall lady in grey and a lad, who were peering into the carriages, evidently in search of friends. Yes—and had discovered them! This soldierly man in riding kit, with erect figure and alert eye—no! A young officer in khaki had come forward and carried him off, and Verona realised with a painful sensation that no one appeared to be awaiting *her*. The crowd hustled, and pushed, and clamoured by—sweetmeat sellers, fruit hawkers shouted their wares, porters rattled their trucks and excited parties of newly-arrived natives chattered together like a flock of parrots.

At last the scene began to clear and her attention was attracted by one solitary figure—a tall, elderly man, standing aloof in the background. In spite of a shabby sun hat, and a suit of shrivelled white drill he had the unmistakable appearance of a gentleman. His features were finely cut, he wore a grizzled moustache, but the face was marked by that indefinable expression presented by life's failures, and his air was timid, even apologetic, as if he felt that he was an intruder in the throng.

Verona had surprised him by looking at her with a quick, furtive glance, instantly withdrawn. Oh no, the shabby gentleman, with the saddest eyes she had ever encountered, could not be anything to her, and strangling the thought at its birth, she turned away to claim her luggage.

Boxes and belongings, each marked "V.C.," had all been duly collected and, for this service she was thanking the guard, when, in reply to his nod of indication, she turned about and found the man from the background at her elbow.

"Pardon me," he faltered, lifting his hat, and his voice though well-bred was tremulous, "is your name—Chandos?"

"Yes," she answered quickly, but the colour had left her lips, "and—and—you are my father!"

His face grew livid as he murmured "Verona," and for a second he seemed so overcome with agitation that he was unable to speak. Then he took her hand—she felt his own tremble—and brushing her cheek with his wiry moustache, murmured:

"My child, you are welcome."

As she looked up into his face she read amazement, incredulity, awe.

"Oh! am I so very different to what you expected?" she asked with a little breathless laugh.

"God knows you are!" was the startling reply. Then, pulling himself together, he added:

"I've a man here who will take charge of all your baggage," beckoning to a Peon with a large brass badge on his sash.

"The victoria only holds two—so I came alone. Let me carry your wrap and bag."

"Is it far to Manora?" she enquired.

"About four miles."

"Because I am so thirsty. May I have a glass of water?"

"Water—no!" he rejoined with unexpected decision.

"But come along and have a cup of tea. I ought to have thought of it before; you must be choked with dust. I've got out of the way of—of——" The remainder of the sentence was inaudible, as he opened the door into a lofty, white-washed room, where several men were lounging at a long refreshment bar.

Verona received an impression of quantities of bananas and buns; swarms of flies and staring faces. As she stood sipping some hot weak tea, from a very thick cup, a dapper little man with shiny face and prominent blue eyes, approached and accosted her father in an off-hand manner.

"Hullo, Chandos! I've never seen you here before.

What has brought you out of your shell?" he asked with an air of lofty condescension.

Mr. Chandos looked momentarily embarrassed, and then replied, rather formally:

"How do you do, Major Gale. I came to meet my daughter."

"*Your* daughter!" and in the echo there was a note of incredulity, bordering on derision, but the little officer accepted the half introduction and bowed profoundly as he said:

"Charmed to make her acquaintance."

Verona resented his air of free and easy patronage, and met the stranger's full, bold gaze, with a pair of cold, unchanging eyes.

There was a chilling pause, during which the little officer quickly summed up the new "Spin"; her grand manner, dainty linen costume, expensive travelling case and ruffled wrap.

As the result of this inspection he turned abruptly to Mr. Chandos and exclaimed:

"I say! I'd no idea you'd been married before!"

Whatever reply was forthcoming it proved unintelligible, for Mr. Chandos was searching and fumbling in his pockets, and there was a hint of colour in his worn face as he turned to the waiter and said:

"I've no money with me. I'll settle with you next time I'm in—you know who I am!"

"How much is it? I'll make it all right," volunteered Major Gale.

"One rupee, Saar," said the turbanned kritmetgar.

Here Verona interposed, authoritatively:

"Thank you very much; I will pay for my tea," and promptly produced the necessary coin.

"No one carries money in India," explained Major Gale; "we all go on tick, or borrow, as you'll soon find out. Just arrived?"

"Yes," assented the lady. The "yes" was like a hailstone.

"From England?"

"Yes." Another hailstone.

"I'm afraid you'll find Manora a bit slow! Eh? We are having our sports on the twentieth. I hope you all come in. Eh——?"

Verona set down her cup and glanced interrogatively at her father. She was anxious to depart,

"Oh, no use asking *him*," resumed the other, with a jocular air. "He buries himself alive. Lots of people don't know of his existence; awful mistake to cut the Service and take to sugar—eh, Chandos?"

"It suits me all right," he answered in a quick, troubled voice. Then as an afterthought:

"I will give your invitation to my wife, thank you. Now, Verona, if you are ready?"

"Quite ready," and with a slight inclination of her head she took leave of her new acquaintance, and walked out of the refreshment room.

Mr. Chandos piloted his daughter into a wide space at the back of the station, where a victoria was in waiting, with a showy bay Arab in the shafts and a man with a gigantic red turban and blue and red coat on the box. His feet were bare, which struck Verona as peculiar.

"We can start at once," said her father, handing her in as he spoke; "Hassan will see to the baggage," and he indicated a long, clumsy conveyance, drawn by two water buffaloes, into which primitive concern her boxes were already being hoisted.

In another moment they were whirled away from the station along a flat, white road—indeed, the whole country seemed as flat as a billiard table. They trotted through a narrow bazaar, full of customers, domestic animals and gaudy little shops; occasionally they were obliged to pull up until a recumbent cow or goat saw fit to rise and suffer them to pass. From the bazaar the road led to a steep bridge, and as they crossed it Mr. Chandos pointed out various objects.

"There is the city," he said, "this side of the river. Two hundred thousand inhabitants. Where you see the spire and trees, is the cantonment. We live further out in this direction."

"And have you no neighbours?"

"Oh, any amount. We are a community of our own. The factory employs some hundreds of natives, and about thirty English and Eurasians."

"Eurasian!" she echoed; "Oh, what a pretty name! What *is* a Eurasian?"

A spasm of pain seemed to contract her father's face, but he appeared not to have heard the question. It was evidently his habit to occasionally ignore or misunderstand what was said to him.

"Had you a good passage, my dear?" he asked.

"Only pretty good. Hot in the Red Sea and rough off Aden."

Here several passing coolies salaamed to her father, and he acknowledged their greeting with a jerk of his hand.

"What a charming salutation!" she exclaimed; "I like it so much better than our nodding and scraping."

"I'm afraid it's the only thing you *will* like," he remarked with a sigh. "Our life will be irksome, I'm afraid. We are real Anglo-Indians, and have made our home out here."

"I shall like my home, you may be sure," she declared, "my home and my own people. How long is it since you were in England, father?"

"Twenty-eight years."

"Oh! almost a lifetime. How is my mother?"

"As usual."

"And my sisters—what are their names?"

"Blanche, Dominga, and Pussy—her real name is Bellamina. Blanche is married to a young man in the telegraph department. She has a little boy."

"My nephew! How delightful."

Mr. Chandos gave a curious little laugh, and resumed:

"Pussy is nearly twenty-four; then you come; then Dominga—she is twenty, and Nicky is seventeen."

"Oh, I do hope they will all like me," said Verona, as she turned a beautiful enthusiastic face on the shattered man at her side.

He glanced at this refined English girl, with her reposeful manners and air of culture and elegance. It was like gazing through an open window on some former state of existence, when all the world seemed young and gay and he had life before him. Well, he was now a gray derelict, expatiating his follies in exile. He found it impossible to realise that the lovely eager girl at his side was his very own daughter; the little Verona that twenty years ago they had, much against his will, consigned to Fernanda Gowdy.

She had come back again—as what? To curse him—or to bless?

"Your sisters are not the least like you," he remarked in a harsh, abrupt voice; they are uneducated girls—simple and emotional. They have only seen life from a sugar factory, and their ideas are cramped and circumscribed; you must make allowances for them. Whatever they are—I believe they mean well."

"Of course they do, and you need not ask me to make allowances for my own sisters. I am only too happy and thankful to think that I shall be with them always—and my mother."

As this conversation took place, the carriage was passing along a winding road, fenced with dusty cactus and an occasional row of acacia trees, but generally running between high standing crops of dense sugar cane. The old bay Arab stepped out well, and before long a square, high tower came into view; then gradually the outline of factory and bungalows, all thrown into sharp relief by a deep crimson sky. Suddenly the victoria rolled into a wide shady avenue, lined with thick trees and bushes, which ultimately widened into a little park, bordered with a number of picturesque bungalows, each standing apart. At the far end was a fine imposing abode, with a great verandah and sloping lawns.

"That is Mr. Lepell's house," explained Mr. Chandos. "He is manager of the factory."

"Why, father, I thought you were manager?"

"I!"—in a tone of ironical scorn. "No; I'm a mere bottle-washer, a subordinate, and will never be anything else."

They now dashed by a group of people who were playing tennis with screams and shoutings; and paused abruptly in their game to stare; and drove on to a bungalow half-concealed from the road by thick bushes; the porch and verandah were entirely screened with lattice work.

As they approached Verona's heart beat fast, and she was aware of several white figures—which had hitherto been stationed like outposts—flying within to give notice of her arrival.

But when the victoria came to a standstill under the porch there was no one to be seen, and the girl was conscious of her father's long indrawn breath, as he handed her out and said:

"I think they are all a little afraid—a little shy, of their English sister. Come into the house and I will fetch them."

The drawing-room opened directly into the verandah, and on first entering it seemed dark; but Verona soon groped her way to a sofa and sat down to wait, whilst her father departed in order to summon the family.

CHAPTER XI

As Verona waited alone in this dim, unfamiliar room, her heart throbbed quickly; more than once she caught her breath with an involuntary gasp, for she realised that she was on the threshold of the most momentous event of her life; within the next few seconds she would be face to face with her mother.

Picture the situation! For twenty years this girl had lived with strangers, moving among friendly family circles, but belonging to none; secretly envious of home and blood ties. Although she bestowed her affections generously, an enormous reserve fund was stored up in her heart, ready to be lavished on someone near and dear, and someone near and dear was coming now. As she gazed with eyes grown deep with longing towards the curtained doors, her feelings were indescribable; in spite of the close, airless atmosphere, she was icy cold, and her clammy hands trembled in her lap.

Half unconsciously she contemplated her surroundings, the imposing grand piano, blackwood carved furniture, upholstered in red damask, marble-topped tables, Indian rugs, and three high doors, corresponding with the french windows. The room resembled a salon in some foreign hotel; no flowers, photographs or books were to be seen, much less a cat or dog, a rumpled newspaper, or scrap of work; but there was a curious unfamiliar odour, a mysterious combination of musk and coffee. To judge by their bungalow and the smart victoria, her parents were in easy circumstances—the standard of wealth in the East presumably differed from that in the West; poverty in England meant luxury in Manora. It was true that her father's clothes were shabby, but she was aware that some elderly men despised their personal appearance; and had not her father administered a shock? A sharp unexpected disappointment? Angrily she drove away the fact, but like an irritating insect, it returned with determined persistence.

He was undoubtedly a gentleman, his features were finely cut, his voice and manner unimpeachable, but there was a hidden tragedy in those weary eyes and timid deprecating air. What was the experience which had crushed all the light out of his face? and why did he look as if he abode day and night with the giant Despair? Was

his haggard expression merely the result of ill-health, or, in consequence, of the doom of exile? Then her thoughts sprung back to that central figure—her mother. Oh, when would she come? What was detaining her?

Presently Verona became aware of a stealthy hustling and scuffling outside one of the curtained doors; her relations were evidently in her immediate vicinity. There was a sound of half-suppressed squeaks, of giggling and tittering, then a voice, in a well-known accent, cried:

“Oh, goody me! Pussy, Pussy, come along!”

Instantly the reply in breathless jerks, like a double knock, “No no! no! you go!—you go!”

And now the drapery over another entrance vibrated—was briskly whisked aside, and someone came into the room. Verona was so agitated she could hardly rise, as she saw approaching a little elderly woman, with a frizzy fringe, eager black eyes, and girlish figure. She noticed that she wore a buff-coloured cotton dress with dark spots and a wide scarlet necktie; and even by the diminishing light the girl discerned that the stranger was dark; oh, much darker than Prince Tossati—or even Madame de Godez!

“Well, Verona, child,” she began in a high staccato key as she advanced and took her hand, “so you have come! My goodness, how tall you are! You must stoop for me to kiss you.”

Verona paused for a moment, irresolute, wondering who this person might be? but bent her head as requested, in order to receive a salute.

“My! you are a great big girl,” continued the little woman; “but tall girls are the fashion—so the papers say!”

As she noticed that Verona’s eyes were still gazing beyond her, and fixed intently on the door, she cried:

“Whatt are you doing, child? Why are you staring so?”

“I am expecting my mother; is she coming soon?” she faltered, in a low tone.

“Soon,” repeated the little dark woman, with a scream of hysterical laughter, “why, she is here, child! Don’t you know that *I* am your mother? Whatt a funny girl! My! whatt a joke!”

“*You*,” stammered Verona, in a faint voice; the room was whirling round, as she hastily put out her hand to support herself by the table.

"Why, of course, and who else?" demanded Mrs. Chandos, in a sharp challenging key. "You are astonished because I am so small; I am astonished because you are so big, so we are quits. No?"

Verona could not speak; she felt as if a rock had fallen upon her heart and was seized by a choking sensation that threatened to strangle her. It was the crucial moment of her life. A thunderbolt had shattered her personality; her very identity seemed dissolved, who was she? What was she? Vainly she struggled to realise that she was the daughter of this half-caste woman! Yes, she, with all her delicate fastidiousness, her uncontrollable antipathy to black blood—her invincible pride of race.

Poor old Madame was indeed prophetic, when she had talked of "punishment." What a sentence! It was worse than death.

Fortunately the light was dim, the sudden Indian twilight had invaded the room, for Verona's face was fixed and frozen in an ecstasy of horror.

"You don't seem to have much to say for yourself," began Mrs. Chandos, in a querulous, complaining tone, but before she had completed the sentence her husband entered, closely followed by two young women, and a slouching youth in a gaudy red blazer.

"Ah, you and your mother have met," he observed in an unnatural muffled voice. "So you have seen her?"

"Who could see anyone in this light?" cried his wife. "Here is the lamp," as a bearded servant entered, carrying a large argand, which he placed on the table.

"Now I'm going to have a good look at Verona," announced Mrs. Chandos, as she seized the girl's wrist in a fierce claw-like clutch—her tiny hand resembled the paw of a marmoset—and led her nearer to the light. The scrutiny proved to be critical, it was more—it was cruel; the hard, eager eyes that stared into hers, were keen as sword points, and the unhappy girl realised that no love lay within that searching gaze.

Releasing her daughter with a little contemptuous push, Mrs. Chandos turned to her husband, and said, "She's like no one I've ever seen; I suppose *you* think Verona takes after your family," and she laughed, as if this idea embodied an excellent joke.

"Yes, I believe she does," admitted Mr. Chandos, as he glanced at the white, set face with a look of anxious deprecation.

"Well, now we must introduce Verona to her sisters and brother," pursued his wife; "this is Dominga," as she led forward a tall, slim girl of twenty, with a bleached complexion and masses of splendid red hair; her eyes were long and narrow, her nose delicately cut, her lips were full; as she pressed them on Verona's cheek they were dry and burning like two coals.

"And here is Pussy; her real name is Bellamina." Pussy, who was shy, approached wriggling and giggling. She was dark and plump, but had a sweet, good-tempered face, and her eyes were magnificent. She looked up timidly at her pale English sister, and in another second Pussy had flung her arms round her neck and given her her first really cordial embrace.

"Oh, my goodness, Verona!" she gasped, "you are a beauty, just like a picture. I shall love you, I know."

"And here is Nicky," continued Mrs. Chandos, dragging up a reluctant youth, with his long lank wrists bare of cuff, his wiry hair on end, his sunken eyes twinkling and mischievous. Nicky grinned from ear to ear, but made no attempt to salute his relative.

"So now you have seen them all except Blanche, and she will come to-morrow," said Mrs. Chandos. "Oh, my! how funny it is, to have one great big, new daughter, just like a stranger, is it not, Verona?"

"Yes," she acquiesced, mechanically, scarcely aware that she had spoken. Was this scene really happening, or was it not some hideous dream?

"If old Fernanda had not been so wecked we should never have seen you at all. No?" Mrs. Chandos concluded most of her sentences with a staccato-like note of negation.

"Which would have been our misfortune," supplemented Mr. Chandos, with unexpected force. "We are all glad to claim Verona."

As he spoke his eyes rested on this mute newcomer with a look of melancholy pride. Here was the only one among his children who was a true Chandos in bearing and breeding; the little fledgling who, twenty years previously had, despite his remonstrances, been thrust out of the nest. What a difference her companionship would have made to him!—an ever present reminder of his home and youth. Would she be a comfort to him now? or would she hate and despise him (he cringed mentally at the thought) for having given her such a mother?

"And now you have seen us all, what do you think of us?" demanded Mrs. Chandos.

Verona was still too stunned to speak; her sole reply was a sickly smile.

"You know all but Blanche."

"And she doesn't count now she's married," protested Dominga; "she made such a bad match; he is only in the telegraph at one hundred and twenty rupees a month. Oh, she was a mad girl!"

"Come, I wonder what you think of us," reiterated her mother, who seemed determined to extract some reply to her question. "My! how white you look! You are tired; better have some tea, it is arl ready."

"No, thank you," faltered Verona, "I had some at the station."

"Whatt," wheeling sharply on her husband, "thatt was just waste, and must have cost one rupee; but you always have these grand lord ways when you are alone, and you forget your big family and small pay. No?"

Verona listened, mentally benumbed; her eyes seemed too large for her face; she looked white and worn, and years older than the girl who so eagerly alighted at Rajahpore an hour previously; but of all the gazing group, the wretched girl's father alone comprehended her sensations; his heart ached for her cruel disillusion. He had intended to drop a word, a little, little hint on their way home—but cowardice had laid her finger on his lips!

"I am sure your sister is tired," he said, glancing hurriedly at Pussy as he spoke; he dared not meet Verona's eyes, tragic with misery and pain. "Take her away, like a good girl, and show her her room." Oh, thrice, thrice blessed escape! Pussy, the ever impulsive, instantly flung her arm round Verona's waist, while Dominga held aside the purdah, and the three sisters passed forth.

"Of course, it is arl strange to you at first," began Dominga, leading the way with a swaggering gait and the heavy trail of some sickly perfume, "but you will soon seem like one of the family, you will see, and just as if you had lived here arl-ways."

What a prospect!

CHAPTER XII

THE apartment into which Verona was formally conducted proved large and airy—somewhat of the barn-like type.

“And you’re to have it to yourself!” announced Dominga, with an impressive gesture. “Father made an awful fuss, and had it newly matted, and white-washed, and see! it opens on the back verandah.” As she spoke she unfastened a glass door and admitted a splendid Eastern moon, which illuminated the whole country and displayed a wide river within a few yards of the bungalow. The room was furnished in simple Indian style; a small cot, a large wardrobe and bare dressing-table, on which stood a bowl of exquisite roses. Dominga indicated with increased complacency a rickety little Davenport. “Father had it put in; he said English ladies write letters in their bedrooms.”

“It was very thoughtful of him,” murmured Verona, and oh, how devoutly she wished that these two girls would go away and leave her to herself. But no! having been cut off from her society for so many years, her sisters were anxious—not to say determined—to enjoy it now. They fidgeted round the dressing-table, talking incessantly and together, devouring her all the time with their eyes. “My! what wonderful hair you have!” cried Pussy, when Verona removed her hat, “and every bit as much as Dominga. Just look, Dom.”

Dominga nodded acquiescence as she stroked it with a patronising touch, and declared:

“Oh, yes—it *is* theek.” Then she glanced into the mirror, which was large, and portrayed two faces—nay, three—for Pussy now leant forward, and added herself to the group.

Verona, in the middle, was the tallest of the trio; her two Eurasian sisters beamed triumphantly on her reflection and their own.

“Oh no, no, no; we are not one bit a—like!” announced Pussy with a giggle, “who would suppose we were relations?”

“But she has a great look of *me*,” proclaimed Dominga; “her hair grows in the same way, her nose is the same shape. We must certainly dress alike! although I am so

fair, and you," glancing at Verona, "are so very dark. What do you say?"

Verona nodded assent; she could not have uttered a word were it to save her life.

Her sister's remark enforced a terrible and tragic truth—she *was* very dark. On the other hand, Dominga was more of a Chandos than a Lopez, and her appearance was not altogether out of keeping with a long line of patrician ancestors. Her head was small and well set on, and her air was distinctly imperious. Besides these advantages she had magnificent hair, and a thin delicate profile. A tinge of colour in her cheeks and lips would have transformed Dominga into a beauty; unfortunately her skin was as white and dead as any sunbleached bone.

As she stood gazing into the glass the mirror reflected three faces, and of the trio, her own, in Dominga's opinion, was infinitely the fairest. It was possibly the most uncommon: being instinct with a peculiar fiery vitality. A striking—but scarcely what is called "a good face"—the jaw was a little square, the lips were a little cruel, the brilliant grey-green eyes were a little hard, a countenance that could look animated, alluring, impassioned, or implacable, reckless and grim. Like many red-haired women Dominga generally wore green—it was her favourite, and she believed, most flattering colour. On the present occasion her white cambric gown was enlivened by a vivid shade of emerald in belt and tie, and she surveyed her reflection with affectionate complacency as she remarked:

"Still, I daresay the same colours will suit us—we are both so pale! I am longing to see your dresses. Now I wonder if your boxes have come? 'I'll just go and ask if there's any sign of that bandy?' and with obliging alacrity the fair Miss Chandos quitted the room.

"Dominga is mother's favourite," announced Pussy. "Mother is awfuller proud of her hair and her dead white skin and her figure. She is sure to be fond of you too; you are *so* pretty. But when she first heard you were coming—my! but she was mad! She said she would not have you, and she would not write. You see," and Pussy's soft dark eyes became apologetic, "we are so many girls, and Blanche was, oh, such a trouble! I'm afraid"—stopping short—"you have a headache. You look so seedy."

"Yes," assented Verona, "I have a dreadful headache."

"It is the horrid train; you will be better after dinner, I know. I will go and hurry it."

What a relief, if only for a moment, to get that ceaseless chatter out of her ears! To have a little breathing space in which to realise her position! Verona was conscious of a sick buzzing in her brain as she sat down, closed her eyes tightly, and endeavoured to collect her thoughts, and lay hold of her self-possession. Truly, she had found her own people; she was one of them now—always and for ever! No wonder she had felt drawn to the East, since its blood ran in her veins! Her outlook on life must be entirely re-focussed; her former aims and illusions lay shattered around her. The unhappy girl sat there, as it were, among the very ruins of her hopes. But solitude and meditation were luxuries far too valuable to be enjoyed for any length of time. A loud thumping on the door aroused Verona from a sort of stupor, and a voice called: "Rona, Rona, dinner! Come a—long!" Outside in the passage Pussy was waiting in ambush, and when her sister appeared, literally fell upon her, and led her triumphantly into the dining-room.

Mrs. Chandos was already seated at table, soup ladle in hand. She had made no change in her dress, but her husband—who hurried in with a muttered apology—wore a white open coat, white shirt and red silk cummerbund, the lingering instinct of the English officer and gentleman. A yellow shaded lamp in the middle of the table was supported by two dishes, one of custard apples and the other of butter cakes. The meal itself was solid and plentiful, and consisted of river fish, baked kid, curry and coconut pudding. Most of the menu was absolutely new to Verona, but although she had not tasted food for hours she was unable to eat; her throat felt constricted and her head burned. Mrs. Chandos viewed such a poor appetite as a direct personal grievance, and—despite her daughter's almost tearful protestations, hinted at "airs" and "pride." The other young people ate heartily, not to say gluttonously, and devoured the hot curry and butter cakes with a relish that was amazing. Beyond a little wrangling among themselves (Verona caught such expressions as "You get out!" "You don't talk to me like that"), they contributed nothing to the general conversation. The head of the house wore the rigid look of a

mask and scarcely opened his lips; he was far more taciturn than during the drive from the station, but his wife made ample compensation for all deficiencies by continually scolding the servants and plying Verona with sharp questions—questions respecting money, accomplishments, acquaintances! questions resembling a series of darts shot by a sure hand. She could scarcely trust herself to speak of the Gowdys; when she touched on the subject her voice became shrill and hysterical. Mrs. Chandos appeared to be bitterly disappointed that her daughter had no acquaintances in the regiment at Rajahpore—or, indeed, as far as she knew—in India, and she had made no “nice friends” on board ship.

“But whatt is the use of the P. & O., but for making useful friends?” argued Mrs. Chandos; “you might as well have come out in a cheap line. The Finlays, of the railway, came out in the *Peninsula* with people who asked Tilly up to Simla. Of course, they did not hear that old Finlay was once a platelayer, but Lizzie Finlay is a clever girl; oh, she is a sharp one! No? Now, boy, whatt are you about”—turning fiercely on a servant who had upset some gravy—“whatt a stupid pig you are! Yes! you did see! Whatt do you go telling lies for? Look at the cloth! When first we were married”—addressing Verona—“Mr. Chandos was so particular he would always have two clean tablecloths a day, and now we have two a week; it is all habit! He has got used to things, and to being poor and a nobody.”

“But father may have a great fortune some day,” proclaimed Dominga, in a loud, exultant key, and as she spoke she planted both elbows firmly on the table.

“You don’t know what you are talking about!” muttered Mr. Chandos into his moustache; “I have never said so.”

“Oh, but he may! A beautiful place in England; Mr. Chandos always goes on like that; we don’t mind him,” declared his wife with a toss of her head.

“And then you will see where *we* come in!” resumed Dominga; “you will see what carriages and clothes we will have. Oh, there will be no more of this dirty sugar work then!”

“Ah, but ‘Delhi is still a long way off,’” quoted Pussy, with a sly laugh.

“Oh, you choop! do,” cried her sister; “you shut up; you are as bad as Nani with your native proverbs.

We must take Rona into Rajahpore. Goody me, how the people will stare! They don't know of our new sister."

"I say, I wonder what they will call *her*?" growled Nicky, speaking with his mouth full of custard apple, and staring reflectively at the recent arrival. "Dom," indicating his sister with a spoon, "is called 'Red Chandos,' Pussy is 'Black Chandos,' father is 'Old Chandos,' I am 'Inky Chandos,' and mother——"

"Now you be quiet!" shrieked his mother, "telling such stories! For shame of you!"

"Well, I'd like to know what they call mother?" demanded Dominga, with the face of a fury.

"I'll tell you that when we're by ourselves," he answered with a wink. Nicky had a way of investing his insolence with a surprisingly matter-of-fact air.

"Verona, you will make quite a stir, I think," interposed Pussy; "you look so ladylike, and hold your head so high; you are far more genteel than Mrs. Captain Tully or Major Barrwell, who won't know *us*: none of the officers' wives ever call here, although they go to Lepell's, and yet father was an Army man, and in the cavalry, too."

"See, now I have an idea," announced Mrs. Chandos suddenly, as if struck with an inspiration; "since last comers call first, why should not Verona make a round of the cantonment? It is quite etiquette, and I can wait outside in the victoria, and then we shall have all the nice people coming out here instead of railway and contractors, and such like trash."

"The Army people will never come out here," declared Dominga, "no, not even for Rona; they are a nasty, sneering, low, stuck-up lot, and I hate them."

"Only the women," corrected Nicky, who had finished his meal, and now felt at leisure to converse. "You don't hate the officers. Oh, ho! Dom. you like them! You are awfully keen to go into tennis and badminton and bands and church. Dom,"—addressing himself especially to Verona—"has had no end of cases! She is a tremendous flirt; she even tried her hand on Salwey, but he didn't seem to see it—did he, Dom?"

"Hell hath no fury like a woman scorned." There must have been some tiny grain of truth in Nicky's rude chaff, for the face Dominga turned on him was fiendish in its expression.

"Will you choop? Will you be quiet?" she screamed, half-rising from her chair, her voice choked with rage.

"Now, do not tease your sister, for I will not have it," remonstrated Mrs. Chandos. "Verona does not know that no one minds one single word of what Nicky says. Oh, he is a shocking liar!"

During the above altercation Mrs. Chandos had been studying her pale English-bred daughter, and had arrived at the conclusion that she was either, like the officers' wives, "stuck-up," or else a dumb, inanimate fool.

"I see you have no tongue," she remarked, "and so"—with a withering glance at her husband—"you are like him. Oh, you will be just to his taste—a *real* Chandos!"

"I am a little tired to-night," replied the unhappy girl, in a faint, apologetic key, and tears were very near her eyes.

"Oh, it is not so very tiring, sitting in the train," retorted Mrs. Chandos, and her expression was not agreeable as she pushed back her chair with a jerk, and rose from the table.

Dinner had now concluded; of the butter cakes or custard apples not a vestige remained. Her father had retired to smoke on the verandah; her sisters were just about to seize upon Verona and drag her away, when her mother interposed, saying:

"No! no! no! do let a—lone! Verona is coming with me. She has yet to see her grandmother."

CHAPTER XIII

WAS there a lower depth than she had touched? Her grandmother! Verona heard the word with dismay. Had she not yet reached the bottom of the abyss? Once upon a time she could claim no relations, but now their number was seemingly legion. With this thought in her mind, she followed with a beating heart and instinctive reluctance her mother, who, beckoning with the quick, supple motion peculiar to her class, led the way across a passage and verandah and down some steps at the rear of the house. Here, facing them, was a large square building or hungalaw, its high roof thrown into sharp relief by the white moonlight. Mrs. Chandos paused for a moment and explained:

“Our house was once the manager’s; that was before the Mutiny year, but was not grand enough for the Lepells, so we got their leavings, and it suits us, being large. This,” pointing to the building, “was the Dufta in old days. Of course, you don’t know Hindustani? ‘Dufta’ means office. Your grandmother prefers it to the house.”

As she concluded she had pushed open a door, and Verona found herself in a low bedroom, lit by a flaring wall-lamp and reeking with heat and oil. Two women were engrossed in a game of cards—(oh, such greasy black cards!)—a little grey-haired ayah, who squatted upon the floor, and a fat old person, who was seated in a battered cane-chair. She had a large, brown, good-humoured face, from which her reddish hair was tightly drawn back and fastened in a knob. Her features were small and well formed, but disfigured by several dark warts; that on her left eyebrow, taken in connection with one on her upper lip, gave a comical, interrogative expression to her otherwise placid countenance. She wore a turkey-red petticoat, a Kurta—the short-sleeved jacket affected by native women; over her shoulders and bare, wrinkled arms was thrown a strip of embroidered muslin; heavy gold ear-rings and a massive necklace completed the costume of Mistress Baptista Lopez. “Aré! so this is the girl,” she exclaimed, as she put down her cards and extended a dumpy hand. For a moment she stared at the visitor in expressive silence, then turned to her daughter with a wheezy laugh, and said, “Aré,

Bapré Bap! Now who would think she was my grand-child?" (Who, indeed!)

Her little black eyes considered every item of Verona's appearance, from the crown of her dark head to the tip of her neat shoe.

"What do you think of her, Nani?—(Hindustani for grandmother).

"She looks like a Burra Miss-Sahib; and is awfully handsome. Soon, soon, she will be married, and you will be glad of that!"

As Mistress Lopez uttered this prophecy she again looked up at her daughter and laughed. Her laugh resembled the sound emitted by a pair of broken bellows.

"I'm sure *I* wonder she was not married long ago!" rejoined Mrs. Chandos in an aggrieved tone.

"Oh, but Fernanda would not let her," explained the old woman. "I know her ways! And so you lived with Fernanda Gowdy for years," now addressing herself to the girl. "She and I were cronies together at the Kidderpore school; the Kidderpore was such a big place, and stood in a great park, and now and then the lady in charge gave a great ball to the officers and people. Anyone could choose a bride. Fernanda was a beauty, my! such a figure! You might blow her away! That Scotchman only saw her twice before he made an offer of marriage. She was just sixteen. I was married at eighteen. My! my! my! whatt a long time a-go; and Fernanda is dead! Did you like her?"

"Yes," replied Verona, "she was good to me always. I was very fond of her."

"But left you no money, no-a—not one piece. Eete was too bad! Aré, it was a shame! Yet she never was a mean girl!"

"She intended to provide for me, and she gave me a first-rate education."

"Ah, that is so; and you have learnt to speak and look some big swell. Oh, oh, yes! you are a beautee; you will cut out Dominga."

At this point Mrs. Chandos brusquely interposed, speaking in Hindustani, and mother and daughter had a loud altercation, which lasted for some minutes.

"Well, well, well! let a-lone! let a-lone!" exclaimed the old woman, who had evidently had the worst of the argument.

"Verona, child, I hope you may be lucky. Some day

I must try your fortune in the crystal; this is not a good day, it is the twenty-fifth."

"Your Nani is taken up with signs, and tokens, and cards, and spells," grumbled Mrs. Chandos, "just like any old bazaar woman. Oh, you will be surprised at her ways!"

"I hope she will get used to all our ways, for some of them are funny," rejoined Mrs. Lopez good-humouredly, and she nodded her head till her three chins shook again.

"Yes, you will, miss, oh, so many fine things; but there is no other home for you, and you cannot live in the river, and be at enmity with the crocodile!"

Verona stared at the speaker with an expression of complete bewilderment.

"Pah! it is only one of mother's silly proverbs," explained Mrs. Chandos; "here, sit down," pushing a cane-stool towards her. Her daughter gladly accepted the morah, and while her two relatives once more discussed her in voluble Hindustani, her eyes wandered languidly around the room.

The floor was covered with soiled matting and one handsome Persian rug. The walls were ornamented with gaudy-coloured prints; in a corner was a low charpoy, or bed, with red-lacquered legs and heaped high with pillows; a press, an ancient bureau, a card-table, and a cooking-stove completed the furniture. Nani's shoes, which were small, an umbrella, which was large, occupied a prominent position; a dress on a peg still retained the voluminous outline of her figure: there were also her domestic pets. In a rude tin cage on the bureau dozed, as Verona subsequently discovered, a peculiarly rude green parrot. The empty fireplace, instead of exhibiting the usual paper frills, made a comfortable cot for a huge black cat. In an angle beyond the press lay some large animal, and Verona received a distinct shock when she discovered that the object of her curiosity was a full-sized goat.

"Ah!" cried Mrs. Lopez, as she caught her eyes. "The go-at! But she is so tame—tame as the cat; I keep her for my coffee; I make it myself fresh, fresh every three days, and see it roasted and ground—just what fills three bottles. Oh, it is awfully good! You shall have some to-morrow, when I will tell your fortune."

"And your Nani will stuff your head with nonsense and proverbs," said Mrs. Chandos.

"No-a, indeed! they all feete," protested her mother.

"Verona is sensible, thatt I can see, and now she is in her father's house she will be content, and will stretch her feet to the length of the sheet. Won't you, child?"

"I am not looking for riches and luxuries, ma'am."

"Yes. But hitherto you have had five fingers in the ghec. You do not know what it is to be poor."

As this was true Verona remained silent.

"And you are so handsome!" resumed the old woman.

"You will be arl-right, I see it in your face. You will be lucky. You know the saying, 'Who eats sugar, will *get* sugar.'"

Then turning sharply to her daughter, she said—"Rosie, this girl is not like any one of you, no! she is different to all. It is another *face*!"

"And how do you account for it, Nani?" enquired Mrs. Chandos, with a sneering smile.

"Oh, it is quite plain! Oh, thatt is easily done!" rejoined Mrs. Lopez with delighted alacrity. "She takes after my mother. Yes: she must inherit from her; for, although she was only a Temple girl who danced before the gods—a Naikin from Goa, where my father first saw her—yet she was celebrated as the most beautiful woman on the whole West coast!"

"And you think Verona beautiful, and like her?" cried her daughter, bursting into a peal of derisive laughter. "Whatt a joke! Well, Nani, you *must* be blind! She is well enough, but no beauty."

"Pah! pah! pah! you are no judge, Rosa! You have only eyes for that red cat of yours; and I tell you this child," and she pointed to Verona, "has a face that will make her a fortune; it may be, arl your fortunes."

"And that reminds me of the money," said Mrs. Chandos, with a sudden start—"the three hundred pounds fortune. Did you bring it in sovereigns, Verona, as we wished?"

"Yes, it is all in my dressing bag."

"Ayah, ayahjee!" and Mrs. Chandos went screaming to the door. "Go, fetch the Missy's big leather bag, and bring here, quick! quick! quick! Or, wait! I go myself," and she darted into the moonlight.

"She is wonderful, your mother," remarked the old woman; "so sharp about money! Such a manager! Great show outside, and pinching in the belly; but she will have it thus, since there are so many to feed, and young girls to marry. Her wishes are high."

"Yes," assented her granddaughter mechanically.

"Arl-day she works so hard in the office next door, doing figures and accounts. She owns a few little houses in the bazaar. and adds on to the pay. It is not much, two hundred a month."

"Pounds?" suggested her companion.

"No! rupees—that is say, shillings. But she is a manager."

"Well, here it is," panted Mrs. Chandos, pushing open the door with her foot, and entering bag in hand; "now let us see the money."

As Verona hastened to produce her keys, and proceeded to unlock the bag, Mrs. Chandos continued:

"I will invest it for you, child; it will bring in good interest; as much as one hundred and fifty rupees a year, which will buy you clothes."

"No, no! it is all for you and father," protested the girl. "I only wish it were more! I really do not want it."

"Yes, that is what I said," agreed Mrs. Chandos, with astonishing animation; "but your father does not agree; it is your little dowry, he says, and is to be put by for your use alone. He will not touch one pice. Sometimes he can be as obstinate as a rock, and I have given him a promise not to accept one rupee from you. No! even should you offer it on your knees!"

While she was speaking Verona had unearthed a green silk bag, which she was now about to place upon the table, but Mrs. Chandos seized it from her, drew the string and emptied out the gold into one shining mass. How her eyes glittered and her cheeks blazed as she bathed her hands in the sovereigns, and let them dribble through her claw-like fingers. She appeared completely transformed, her complexion glowed, the hard lines on her face relaxed into smiles.

Verona, as she stared in wonderment, no longer disbelieved the tale that her mother had once been a beauty. How strange that the mere sight of gold should thus transfigure her countenance—for a second it was illumined with the colour and sparkle of her long lost youth. At this moment there was a sudden sound of crushed gravel without; the door was opened ceremoniously, and a tall, obese old man stood on the threshold. Verona's heart failed her as she beheld him, and asked herself the desperate question if here was yet another relation?

This time a pure native,

CHAPTER XIV

THE visitor wore a long, blue cloth coat, belted with leather, a huge white turban and a venerable white beard. His air and expression of benevolent dignity recalled to Verona the pictures of the prophet Abraham.

"Why, it is Abdul Buk!" exclaimed Mrs. Chandos. "Abdul, what a man you are! I believe," laying her hand over the gold in front of her, "you smell money."

"Nay!" and he salaamed as he spoke; "I have come hither on a little business; I know nought of smell, but the sight of money is ever good." He grinned broadly at his own pleasantry and displayed several yellow stumps.

"Behold my new grandchild, Abdul," cried Mrs. Lopez, indicating Verona with flattering complacency; "is she not well grown?"

Once more he salaamed, and the girl slightly bent her head in acknowledgment of the salute.

"He manages your mother's little property," continued the old woman, "and has doubled her income. Oh, he is very clever!"

"I hope he will double this gold," said Mrs. Chandos, piling it up into neat rows. "See, Abdul, three hundred English sovereigns; it belongs to my daughter; it is her fortune," and as she spoke she filled both hands with the coin and held them toward him with a playful air. "Don't you wish it was all yours?"

"Money, in a woman's hands, won't last; a child left in the hands of a man, won't live," quoted Mrs. Lopez with impressive solemnity.

"But Abdul will invest it for Verona, and get her good interest—won't you, Abdul?" said Mrs. Chandos; "say one hundred and fifty rupees a year." As she spoke she turned towards him, and their eyes met in one long, fixed look.

"Oh, yess; certainly," he answered, "I can promise thatt. Oh, yess."

"Then you will invest in sugar?"

"Oh, yess."

"Had you better take it now, or another time?"

"No time like the present," he replied; "delays are dangerous. See," to Mrs. Lopez, "I have the English proverbs at my fingers' ends. My carriage is here, and I will take the money. In this big house it is not safe."

"That is true," acquiesced Nani. Meanwhile Mrs. Chandos, who seemed to be feverishly excited, gathered up the sovereigns with hot tremulous fingers, and returned them into the green silk bag, which she handed to Abdul with a nod of mysterious significance.

"Of course, he will give a receipt," said Mrs. Lopez in a sharp business-like voice; "better take receipt."

"Oh, yess; I will go into the office and write it, and Mrs. Chandos will lend me one stamp," and he tramped out with ponderous creaking footfall. Whilst Abdul was absent the crocodile travelling case attracted Mrs. Lopez's curiosity, and she requested an immediate introduction to its further contents. One by one these were gradually presented, a tiny gold watch and jewelled chain, a case of valuable rings. As each was exhibited Mrs. Lopez and her daughter joined in a harmonious duet of "Oh, mys!" But a torquoise and diamond necklace, and a splendid emerald pendant, set in brilliants, reduced them to a condition of gasping silence. Subsequent silver-mounted brushes, mirrors and bottles and even a gold shoe-horn appeared in comparison but very small deer. Had that gambling old card table, imported in the early days of John Company, ever exhibited as much money's worth? The ayah had crept in stealthily; so had Pussy. Were they drawn by some explicable instinct, or by the mere, careless chance of pure coincidence? Abdul, too, had returned, paper in hand, and stood silent in the background, admiring, and possibly appraising, the jewels. What a scene for an artist! The hot, squalid room, the dark faces, the staring, greedy eyes; in the midst the little old table loaded with jewels, and the pale, indifferent English girl to whom they all belonged.

"What think you of these, Abdul?" demanded Mrs. Chandos, pointing with a tremulous finger.

"That," advancing two steps, with creaking boots, "the wife of the Viceroy hath no better."

"And their value?" she asked, sharply.

"Nay, I am ignorant. I deal in sugar cane and gram, not precious stones. It were wise to put them in some place of safety, and here is the receipt for the money," he continued, holding out a sheet of paper of which was inscribed: "Manora, September fifth. Received, to place at good, safe interest, as I may find occasion, the sum of three hundred sovereigns, English money, from Miss

Verona Chandos, the interest to be paid every six months into her hands by me, ABDUL HAMID BUK."

"There! that is all right and stamped," he said, "and now I will take the gold and depart. I would advise the Missy Sahib to be mindful of her jewels."

"Thank God the money will be out of the house!" said Mrs. Lopez, piously; "this, as is well known, is an awful district for robbery and murder."

"Only among natives," corrected Mrs. Chandos, with a fearless toss of her head.

"It has a very bad name," argued her mother, "that you know, and that is why Salwey is in charge of the police; truly the last man was an old woman."

"And this one is a young devil!" cried her daughter with startling vehemence.

"Come to the office once more, Abdul. I want a word with you about my rents," said Mrs. Chandos.

"Certainly," he replied, and, money in hand, and having executed a general salaam, the benignant patriarch tramped out of the room in the wake of his employer. Pussy assisted her sister to collect and put away the jewellery, uttering, as she did so, many flattering adjectives.

"Now you must go to bed, children," announced their grandmother; "it is after nine o'clock. The travelling girl is dead tired," and at last Verona escaped to her own quarters, kind Pussy carrying the dressing-bag, and affectionately anxious to help her to undress, and, above all, to brush her hair. Her good offices were set aside with the greatest difficulty. Being naturally a little dense, it never dawned upon Bellamina Chandos that her sister did not require assistance, or would prefer her own company.

At last her simple mind accepted the novel idea, and her entreaties ceased.

"Dom," she whispered, as she embraced her, "is not quite sure; but I know—that I shall love you."

With one vigorous hug she vanished, and Verona was left alone.

As soon as she had closed and carefully bolted the door on Pussy's pretty, entreating face, Verona turned down the smoky lamp and sat for a considerable time in the dark, alone with her own thoughts. Presently these thoughts became so terrible—so unbearably painful,

like some intense physical agony that she rose, unfastened the window and wandered into the verandah and down a path by the bank of the river. The river was wide and swift, being swollen by the recent rains; on the further side it was bordered by a high jungle of reeds and rushes, and beyond it, as seen through a filmy veil of gauze, lay the spreading moonlit plain which seemed to stretch away into the infinite, which was also India! Behind rose the bungalow, large and straggling: on the left towered the factory; to the right lay the office, with the light still burning in the window. Verona noticed these details as she paced the pathway, flitting to and fro like some distracted spirit on the banks of the Styx; and was she not a creature suddenly transported to an unknown world?

She was no longer Verona Chandos, who had fared delicately all her life, who had carefully cultivated taste in music and literature, definite ideas respecting bindings and coloured prints, who collected book plates, was discriminating in her choice of associates, dainty in her tastes, a much-desired partner for golf, bridge or cotillon, a girl who had found her world a pleasant place to live in, and had tried to share with others some of the sunshine which had fallen to her lot. And she was not a bad girl—though she might have been better; was inclined to be quick-tempered and a little supercilious, but she had endeavoured to be sincere, to be kind to the sick and poor, and to champion dumb animals. Well, that Verona was dead; she had passed away for ever, with her little vanities and tempers and love of pretty clothes and interesting pursuits.

And here was the other, the real, original Verona, a poor half-caste, whose life and thoughts must be confined to the limits of her parents' purse and wishes, who must keep in step with her two sisters and look for nothing beyond the horizon of her home. And what had she in common with her relations? Nothing beyond the mere fact of her existence and name. Apparently their aim in life was to climb into station society; and her aim in life?—what was her dearest wish at the present moment? Her dearest wish—she scarcely dared whisper it even to her inner soul. Verona was making acquaintance with the truth, the hideous, hard-hearted truth, and her thoughts were so disordered that she did not realise what time of night it was, or even that it was night! But at last her tired body refused to co-operate with her restless mind,

and, completely exhausted, she was compelled to drag herself to her bed—where sleep immediately claimed her.

Though dreams visited the worn-out traveller, her slumbers were almost as profound as if she had really passed away. Once she awoke in the still night; the moon streamed full into her room; there was a faint sound of flowing water. Where was she? Her drowsy brain failed to recall the great events of yesterday.

Suddenly a strange, weird sound pierced the silence, the wild, horrible howl of a pack of hunting jackals as they swept across the plain beyond the river, and for a frantic moment the wretched girl believed herself to be listening, in some dim region, to the agonised wailing of lost souls.

But no; it was only a hideous nightmare! She turned on her side with a sigh of relief, and again relapsed into slumber.

In the morning when Verona opened her eyes, it was to gaze vacantly about her. She was at a loss to remember how she came to be lying in this great bare room. Where was she? Was she in Spain, or some out-of-the-way French town? She strove to summon her scattered thoughts, and all too soon they came trooping back and assured her that she was at last at home—yes, in her real home, among her own people! She was sensible of a feeling of repulsion and absolute despair, and yet another self—which must have been her original baby self—cried shame on her for her hard heart and unnatural, wicked pride. Why should she be proud? She was nothing more nor less than a well-educated half-caste, who had been foolishly removed from her proper sphere, her own particular class. Her father—oh! why had he married a woman of such a race? Now, she understood his constrained manner, his ashamed silence and his downcast air, why he seemed to shun his former associates and to withdraw from society like some social outlaw. And she, who had never had one hint of her own origin, had acquired the ideas, refinements and prejudices of a high-bred English girl. What was to become of her?

She sat up in bed, holding her hands to her throbbing head and endeavoured to individualise her relations. Her father—the broken-down gentleman, lethargic and dumb; her mother—she shrank from the subject as from a flame; her sisters—uneducated, emotional, shrill; given to cheap scents and greasy sweetmeats; her grandmother—but one

degree above the ayah; and her own good looks complacently attributed to an ancestress, a Temple girl who danced before the gods!

It all sounded like an Opera Bouffé, a transformation scene of wild, topsy-turvy comedy, instead of which it was the sharp, agonising truth; no burlesque, but a heart-breaking tragedy—the tragedy of her life. How was she to endure this existence? What could she do? Where could she go? Where hide herself? For the first time in her existence, a longing for death surprised her.

There was a loud rattling and calling at the door, which she opened, to discover (as she half expected), Pussy, in a tattered pink dressing-jacket and bare feet, bringing her her morning Chotah Hazri. Here was an end to silence and self-communion; she must rouse herself, summon her self-command and confront her fate. Meanwhile a cup of fragrant Indian tea, some slices of curious grey bazaar bread and peculiarly white butter seemed delicious fare to a girl who had scarcely tasted food for four and twenty hours.

The long hours of the morning were devoted by Verona to unpacking her boxes and distributing gifts, such as books, fans, little ornaments and knick-knacks; her sisters and Nicky were enchanted with their presents; her mother only accepted her share with a doubtful and ungracious air, nor did she attempt to disguise her opinion that she regarded such outlay as a sinful waste of money.

In the afternoon, when tiffin was over, it was the custom of the entire family to repair to their several lairs in order to enjoy a long siesta; and Verona, thus released, now set about unpacking her own personal effects; but Pussy, for once, dispensed with her nap and clung to her sister with an offer of her society and assistance; it was impossible for her to comprehend that any one could endure to be alone.

She artlessly believed that Verona was as anxious for her company as she was to accord it. Her co-operation being politely declined, instead of taking her departure—as hoped for—Pussy merely kicked off her shoes and flung herself at full length on the bed, where she lay in an attitude of voluptuous ease, lazily contemplating her sister's exertions.

"My, my, my, ! how neat you are!" she exclaimed in admiration, as she watched her busy relative emptying boxes and putting away linen, "and how quick; the ayah

would have taken hours! What heaps of stockings, petticoats, and hanks—none of us read, except Father and Dow—you see, we've not had much schooling. Nicky is as ignorant as a candle boy, only for that he would get into the works. I am just as bad. Dominga is our clever one, she writes a good hand, and she sings splendidly!"

"Oh, does she?" said Verona, "where was she taught?"

"She learnt at the school, we were both at school in Nam Tak. They say her voice is extraordinary, you can hear it half a koss away. She plays tennis and badminton better than any girl in Manora. Mother is so proud of her! Mother is clever too, especially at writing and figures, she does accounts. Yes, Mother loves two things, Dominga and money! Father loves silence and smoking. Man loves coffee and news."

"And Pissy?" looking up with a smile.

"Loves you, Verona."

"Thank you, dear."

"And does someone else so much? but I cannot tell you yet, it is a secret," and Pissy turned her face away and hid her blushes in the pillow. However, her blushes and emotions were of transitory duration, for in a few seconds her brightly white was sewing.

"Of course, we have a thousand lovers, Verona!"

"I? Certainly not!"

"Oh, but—it cannot be true, why there is Dominga, not a quarter so pretty, and she has had dozens. Even I saw Trotter has a young man in the commissariat."

"And I saw not, even what you call one young man, in anything."

"You are so pretty, you will get millions of offers. Mother wishes us all to marry. Even when Blanche went, and it was such a poor match, she was glad. She expects Dominga to marry an officer. Ah, Bona, you are not even listening," she protested in a little piteous way, "and I thought you might like to hear all about it."

"Of course I am listening," replied her sister, from the interior of an open box over which she was stooping. "you were saying something about Dominga and an officer."

"Yes, and we hardly know one. Father was in the Army himself, the 1st Hussars, and yet he will never call on the mess, although friends of his have been in the station. Father is so odd nothing will make him go near

a regiment, not even mother, and she can generally get him to do whatever she chooses; he has given in to her about everything, except about *you*."

"What about me?" asked her sister, quickly raising her head; "but no, don't tell me—it is better not."

"Oh, mother will tell you herself; it is no secret! She has told everyone in Manora that she did not want you to come out. It was another girl to marry, she said, and no money! She declared you could get a nice situation at home; and you were a stranger, a black stranger, and would ruin us with your bad example and silly English notions. Even Nani said you were like the Dhoby's donkey, for you neither belonged to the house, or the river! You know how she talks in proverbs?"

"Yes," assented Verona in a faint voice.

"But father swore you should come, and he wrote himself—he who never writes. Do you know, when mother got your letter she screamed for three whole hours! She always does that when she is awfully angry. Oh, she is not angry now she has seen you; no, no, no, she is proud! I heard her this morning talking over the wall to Mrs. Trotter, and boasting of your hair and figure. But still, I think Dominga will always be first."

"And why not. My mother has had her with her since she was born, and I am, as you know, a stranger."

"You won't be long so," declared Pussy; "you will soon be at home, I can see. Just look how you've put away your things and arranged this room. Now, I must tell you something about the people all round before they come to call—so you will know. First of all there are Mr. and Mrs. Lepell in the big bungalow, he is the manager of the factory, and draws two thousand rupees a month; he is nice and friendly, but we never get to know *her* any better. Oh, she is not exactly proud, but she keeps us off. Her father was a big swell, and she has a fortune. She is not at all young; mother says she must be five-and-forty, but she dresses beautifully, and gives such fine parties; they entertain the whole station like a king and queen. Yess, she is quite the Burra Mem Sahib, and only asks us to her small affairs, when we meet just the other factory people. Mother hates her—oh, goody me!—like poison, but is always awfully pleasant to her, and sends her her best mango jelly and chutney, because she hopes she may take up Dominga. She did ask Dom once to

sing, and if Mrs. Lepell would chaperon Dom into society, her fortune would be made. Oh, my, yess ! ”

“ I see,” assented her listener, “ and it is with this hope that mother sends her mango jam ? ”

“ Of course. Then there are the Trotters,” resumed Pussy, with an air of complacent narration ; “ he was only a sergeant in some regiment, and he is the engineer here ; they say he is very clever—just a common, rough man, with such a pushing family. There is Mrs. Trotter and Amelia and Georgina, Louisa and Tom. Tom is in the works. He and Dominga used to be pals ; but she threw him over long-a-go. The Trotters are always looking down on us, because we have never been home, and they were born in England ; but they are coolie people, and our father is an officer and a gentleman. Sometimes we are awfully friendly with the Trotters, and in and out ten times a day ; sometimes we don’t speak for months. Last time we quarrelled was about a bottle of anchovy sauce which they never returned.

“ Then there are the Watkins, a newly-married couple, out from Manchester. He is secretary ; she is awfully prim, and afraid to know anyone, and dresses for dinner when they are quite *alone*, and talks of her father keeping two gardeners. There are the Cavalhos ; they are just half-castes ; oh, so dark, and yet not bad. I like them ; they are awfully good-natured. When anyone is in trouble they all run to Mistress Cavalho. Also there are the Olivers—gone home on leave—very nice people and not stiff, though they are gentry folk. There are some young men clerks—Raymond, and Smith and Mackenzie. We all meet at the tennis three times a week and play together, whether we are friends or not. Then there is Salwey——” She paused.

“ Who is he ? ” enquired Verona, feigning an interest which she was far from feeling.

“ The police officer, a nephew of Mrs. Lepell’s ; he lives in cantonments. He is so strict and severe. Oh, mother does hate him—I believe she is afraid of him ! ”

“ How can he possibly affect mother ? ” enquired Verona, as she sorted out some gloves.

“ Of course, not all, but he gives you the horrid notion that he can read your thoughts, and knows every single little thing about you. Whenever he looks at me, I can’t help wriggling like an insect on a pin, and mother declares that he has the evil eye ! ”

"The evil eye!" repeated Verona; "you don't really believe in such nonsense?"

"Well, perhaps not. Salwey's eyes are bluey-grey, like steel. He is not bad looking, and once—now I'll tell you a secret——"

"No, don't! Please!" protested Verona, throwing up her hands.

"Oh, but I must; I do like talking secrets," pursued Pussy with breathless volubility, "I think Dominga used to be crazy about him, and sent him notes by Nicky."

"What!"

"Yes; but I don't believe he ever gave them. Salwey and Nicky are great friends. He lives near the river and has a boat, and comes up to the Lepells that way when he is in the station. He gave Nicky a pup, and books and advice, and taught him to row. We have a boat, too. Nicky's awfully fond of Salwey, he just worships him; but he can't bear Dominga, and I don't believe he ever gave the letters. You must know that in this house there are two factions: it is Dom and mother against Nick and me. Oh! oh! oh!" suddenly sitting erect, "you are getting out your dresses! how lovelee!" as Verona unfolded and displayed a white *crêpe de chine*, a green *foularde* and an exquisite white and silver ball dress.

Pussy clapped her hands excitedly, and screaming, "Oh, I must call the others," leapt off the bed and ran shoeless out of the room.

Verona was a girl who wore her clothes well in every respect; not only had she the knack of investing them with her own grace and individuality, but they still seemed dainty and fresh long after they had passed their first bloom. There were no tea or coffee stains on the front breadth (that every-day misfortune), frayed seams or ragged edges in the gowns she was taking from her boxes or ranging round the room for the promised exhibition. Here were tailor costumes, evening dresses, muslins, laces and many dainty frocks which had been worn at Homburg, Aix and Cannes, and some had cost what is figuratively termed "a small fortune."

The apartment now resembled the *atelier* of some fashionable milliner, the stock was so choice and extensive. In a surprisingly short time the "others" had assembled. These included Mrs. Chandos, her hair in curling pins, spotted dressing-jacket and short striped petticoat—she

had very neat feet; Dominga, in ragged *déshabille*; the ayah, attracted from her hookah; last, not least, Granny Lopez, clad in a loose garment that was really an old tussore silk dustcloak, a scanty petticoat and a pair of discarded tennis shoes, carrying under her arm a reluctant black cat—all come to behold and gloat over the great show. Nani was accommodated with a chair, and Verona, by special request, held up and exhibited separately the most elegant items of her wardrobe.

What little screams of admiration greeted the sight of some garments; what a chorus of "Oh, mys!" attended the display of others. By the end of half an hour every possible epithet of admiration had been exhausted, and Verona was exhausted too.

"Well, in all my life, I never did see such beautiful clothes," confessed Mrs. Chandos.

Which statement was no doubt true.

"They must have cost hundreds of pounds."

This was also a fact.

"Oh, my! Oh, my! what advantages you have had, Verona, child, compared with these poor girls," she continued as she flitted about the room in a condition of extraordinary excitement; "you must share your fine feathers with them now. If Dominga here were set off in that blue and white, she would look every bit as well as you; all she wants is to be dressed up in good clothes—eh, Nani?"

"That is so," agreed the elder with her wheezy laugh, "for who can row without water?"

"Now I shall divide some of these things," declared Mrs. Chandos, as she hovered about; "Verona could not wear half of them."

Verona, who had made up her mind never again to mix in society, and had originally brought out this large outfit with the intention of sharing it with her sisters, would nevertheless have preferred to have bestowed her garments to her own liking, and not to stand by passively while her mother distributed her wardrobe. The choicest articles were shamelessly selected for Dominga—for instance, a magnificent white satin gown, a pale blue *crêpe de chine*, an elaborate lace costume, a mauve and silver tea gown. Then Pussy was endowed with various frocks and hats (Verona helping in the selection), and the possession of a certain pink feather boa had made her completely happy. Verona also chose a pretty chiffon cape, which

she spread over her grandmother's ample shoulders. It was a very orgie of millinery, among which Mrs. Chandos hovered, picking out a toque, a sash there. At last, when the supply had become somewhat low, she said:

"Well that will do for the girls; I will take these blouses and the pink satin for myself; it will alter, and I will wear it for the Volunteer Ball. Eh, Nani, what do you say?"

"I say that if you wear such a frock you'll be more celebrated than the devil!"

"Ah, bah!" cried her daughter. "You funny old woman. Is that all you have to say?"

"No," she responded, and turning to Verona with a nod of her head at the different piles of her property which had been distributed, "they all like you very much now, Verona, child—he who holds the ladle has everybody his friend." But let me tell you one thing more—your mother has a pocket like the crop of a duck—you can never fill it!"

"And you are a curiosity and should be put in a museum," retorted her daughter in great good humour. "Come, come, it is now half-past four o'clock; Blanche and Montagu will be here soon; let us clear away and dress," and swooping down upon a heap of her spoils, Mrs. Chandos hurried out of the room, followed by Dominga, Pussy and the ayah, each bowed down and nearly hidden by their loads of new finery.

But Mrs. Lopez was slower to move; having extricated herself from her chair with considerable difficulty, she stood for a moment gazing at Verona, and said, in an impressive voice:

"You have given me a nice present; you are a very generous girl and do not despise your old crannie grandmother, so I will tell you one good proverb to cheer you! Now listen."

"I am listening, Nani."

"Our past is ourselves, what we are, and will be," quoted Mrs. Lopez, and she continued to look fixedly at Verona with a significant expression in her little dark eyes. "Do not trouble, child—you will never be of *us*," then hitching the black cat under her arm, she waddled away to her own quarters.

CHAPTER XV

THERE was a sudden commotion in the front part of the bungalow, barking, running and calling. Dominga, in a breathless condition, burst in upon Verona, and gasped out:

"Oh, my goodness, here is Blanche! and none of us are dressed! Do go into the drawing-room, you are ready. Go, go, go!"

Thus exhorted, Verona hastened into that apartment barely in time to see a gharry, drawn by two wretched ponies, rattle underneath the porch.

The first person she descried was a stout ayah, who descended backwards, carrying an infant over her shoulder; an alert, sharp-looking creature, in a gay hood, with eyes like two jet beads, and a dusky skin.

The next to appear was, no doubt, Blanche herself; a little dark, wiry woman, closely resembling her mother, wearing a smart pink cotton, a picture hat and a profusion of bead chains. She sprang up the steps, suddenly stopped short, stared helplessly at Verona, and exclaimed:

"Hul—lo! I suppose this is the third Miss Chandos?" Then she giggled immoderately, and proceeded to kiss her, adding:

"I am Blanche Blanche Montagu Jones, you know, and here," turning and dragging forward her husband, "is your brother, Montagu."

Montagu was a lank, narrow-chested Eurasian, showily dressed in a blue and white striped suit; he wore a red satin tie, a gilt chain and several rings. He had well-cut features, a simple, amiable expression, and a pair of pale grey eyes, which seemed peculiarly out of place when contrasted with his dark face, and ink-black hair.

"Come, you may kiss her; I give you leave," declared his sprightly wife, pushing him forward with both hands.

But however willing he might have been to accept this permission, there was an expression on the face of the third Miss Chandos which constrained him, and he merely sniggered and offered a limp hand.

"What! not kiss Monty, your own brother?" cried Blanche, in a tone of affronted amazement, "then all I can say is—I'm sorry for your *taste*!"

Meanwhile Monty consoled himself by saluting his

mother-in-law—with whom he appeared to be on terms of unnatural affection.

“And here,” resumed Blanche, now waving forward her offspring, “is your dear little nephew, Chandos Montagu Jones; he is ten weeks old to-day. Kiss your new auntie, sweetie king.”

From this embrace there was of course no escape; for the ayah promptly handed the child to Verona with an air of gratified relief. If Verona had been informed that it was the woman's own infant, she would have accepted the announcement without demur, the little thing was so dark; its olive face was bright and cheery, and she dandled it, kissed it, and carried it about with a secret presentiment that she would like it better than either of its parents!

“Well, now there is so much I want to know,” began Blanche, as she threw herself into a chair; “when did she come?” nodding at Verona, “for we all went to the train and could not see her anywhere. We took the De Castros, and the Jenkins, and Mr. Bott, and those two young fellows from the cantonment office. Oh, my! they were all dying to get the first sight of Verona, and she was not there. She must have come by the four o'clock, and we went to the half-past two.”

“Dios!” suddenly interrupting herself with a loud shriek, for here entered, with mincing and self-conscious gait, Dominga and Pussy attired in two of Verona's most elegant casino costumes. The former in pale green (her particular colour) veiled with white lace, and garnished with black velvet; the latter, in a superb hand-painted muslin. They wore hats and ruffles to correspond, and an air of overwhelming complacency.

“Why, why, what is this, what is this?” screamed Blanche, backing towards the verandah with uplifted hands and an expression of awe and bewilderment.

Without delay it was volubly explained to her by three voices, all gabbling together, that these were the garments of Verona, who had more smart clothes than the room could hold. Then Dominga and Pussy sat down, each on a separate sofa, spread out their skirts, fanned themselves languidly, and proceeded to imagine that they were fine ladies. Gradually Blanche's gaze of awed admiration faded into a scowl of envy.

Montagu stared and sniggered, and twirled his moustache, whilst Verona stood in the background, holding

the little dark child, who apparently liked her, and clung to her neck like a very crab.

"Oh, but you shall have your share, too!" said Dominga, in a soothing tone, as she recognised the storm cone—for Blanche had inherited her mother's temper.

"There is a lovely toque for you, and such a dress piece of white alpaca, and you shall have one of my parasols. There now!"

"Parasol, cha—a—h" (native expression of scorn)—"you put me off like that! Why shouldn't I have a smart dress? How sly and greedy you all are, keeping the grand things to yourselves—just like pigs. One thing you forget," as she straightened herself and glared from Dominga to Pussy, then back from Pussy to Dominga, "I am the eldest!"

"Oh, yes, but that does not count now," was the bold retort, "you are not one of us; you are married. Oh, my!" with a change of key. "Here is Mrs. Lepell, what shall we do?"

During this interesting altercation a slim little lady, with a clever piquant face, had walked on to the verandah totally unnoticed.

She wore a simple linen gown and a large garden hat, and her hair, which was turned off her delicate careworn face, was touched with grey.

"How do you do, Mrs. Chandos?" she said, coming forward, then gave a perceptible start as her eye fell on the two Paris models.

"I've just walked across to call on your daughter, the new arrival," and she nodded to the rest of the company.

"Oh, thank you," stammered Mrs. Chandos, "you are so kind, there she is," and she beckoned to Verona, who stood in the background, still holding the child; this its grandmother snatched from her with irritable haste, and said as she thrust it into the ayah's arms:

"Verona, here is Mrs. Lepell, she has been so kind as to ask for you."

If Mrs. Lepell had been amazed by the brilliant toilettes of the Misses Chandos, she was more astonished now, when a girl of her own class came slowly forward: a beautiful dark-eyed creature, with an air of unaffected distinction.

At first she could scarcely believe the evidence of her senses. Here, indeed, was a dove in the crow's nest.

"So you only arrived yesterday?" she managed to articulate at last.

"Yes, last evening."

"Shall we sit over here?" said Mrs. Lepell, indicating a settee a little apart. Her visit was to the stranger, whose acquaintance she was now really anxious to make. She particularly disliked Mrs. Chandos, and if there was one young woman who was more obnoxious to her than Dominga, it was Blanche Montagu Jones. The family accepted the hint with obvious reluctance, and stood aloof in a group, whispering, giggling and wrangling.

"I believe you have never been in India since you were a small child," continued Mrs. Lepell, addressing her companion.

"No, I do not remember it; I have lived in Europe for twenty years."

"Ah, I wonder what you will think of us all!"

Verona raised her eyes to her visitor, then dropped them hastily, but not before Mrs. Lepell had caught their look of unspoken despair.

"I am quite an old Anglo-Indian," she continued briskly, "I loathed the country at first, now I am much attached to it; the cold weather will be here in another few weeks. You will enjoy that, it is our gay season."

Here it seemed to Mrs. Lepell that her companion gave a slight involuntary shudder.

"I am sure you will wonder at the way these mad girls are giggling," said Mrs. Chandos, with a would-be jaunty air, as she approached and indicated Dominga and Pussy. "They are awfully smart, and have been trying on their sister's kind presents."

"Why, mother," interposed Blanche (who had no fear of Mrs. Lepell, her husband not being in the factory), "Pussy tells me that besides the beautiful presents she brought out, you divided all Verona's best gowns between her and Dominga!"

On such occasions as the present Mrs. Chandos hated her eldest daughter, who had a sharp and utterly fearless tongue.

"Oh, you do not understand," she began excitedly.

"I see I've come in for a dress-rehearsal," observed Mrs. Lepell, hoping to smooth matters.

"Borrowed plumes! second-hand clothes. Ch-a-ah!" sneered Blanche, in a shrill, discordant key. She breathed

so hard that all her beads jingled, and her husband retreated precipitately into the verandah.

Was Blanche going to have a row with her mother?

Oh, she was so fond of rows! Rows commencing with shrill vituperation, screaming abuse, and concluding (in cases of defeat) in hysterics and collapse.

"I think you must have come out with the Trevors," continued Mrs. Lepell, as she turned to Verona, "I see they were in the *Egypt*."

"Yes, and I met them before; we were at the same hotel in Cannes for three months."

"Then you know the Riviera?"

"Yes, we generally spent the winter there—or in Florence."

"You seem to have travelled a good deal."

"We lived on the Continent ever since I grew up. This time last year we were at Homburg."

"I wonder if you met my cousins, Sir Ellis and Lady Byng? They go there every season."

"Oh, yes, I used to go motoring with them, and played golf with their daughter, Eva; she is such a nice girl. We were great friends."

For the moment Verona had forgotten herself and her surroundings. She was no longer an Eurasian, patronised by the wife of her father's employer, but one English woman talking to another on an agreeable equality.

"I'm sure you had happy times at Homburg," said Mrs. Lepell, "and of course you went to the Opera at Frankfurt."

"Yes, constantly; we used to rush over on a motor car."

"And here you come down to bullock carts! Well, if we're not progressive, we're at least picturesque. I hope you brought out a few of the last new books, as well as the last new fashions?"

"Yes, I've a fairly good supply, and all this month's magazines."

"Then I shall certainly come and borrow from you; I am a ravenous reader, and find it difficult to keep myself going in books. At present I am starving and reduced to back numbers."

"I shall be delighted to supply you."

"Very well, then," said Mrs. Lepell, rising, "you have no idea how rapacious I can be. I hope you will come and see me as soon as you are settled. I am always at home, from three to five."

This was the warmest invitation the stiff-necked little lady had ever accorded to a Chandos; she had never told Dominga she was "at home from three to five." But, then, she neither admired nor pitied Dominga, who was not an interesting acquaintance, merely an emotional, empty-headed half-caste, with a fierce craving for pleasure, and a powerful soprano voice.

This new arrival was a totally different person, well-educated, refined, reserved. Alas, poor child! fresh from congenial English society and many agreeable friends, to be cast into the midst of this squalid Eurasian family. What a fate!

CHAPTER XVI

MR. AND MRS. MONTAGU JONES remained to dine with their relations, and Nani Lopez joined the party, invested in the rich satin purple gown which she had purchased for Blanche's wedding; or, more correctly speaking, she wore the flowing skirt, but had substituted for the bodice an easy white jacket, and had coloured her face white to correspond. Verona surveyed her venerable relations with reproachful eyes. *How* could people, who were naturally dark, imagine it possible to change their skin by merely covering it with layers of pearl powder?

"Granny always comes in when we have Blanche," explained Dominga, in a whisper, "because she hears the news. All the same, she and Blanche were never good friends. She calls Blanche a silly little bazaar cat."

Mr. Chandos, who seemed to spend his entire day in the factory, appeared shortly before dinner and received with surprise the little gifts offered by his English daughter.

"Books," he muttered, "now I wonder how you guessed at what I liked best? Books, and a tobacco pouch. My two resources are reading and smoking."

"Oh, yess, he is arl-right when he has his pipe and his books," remarked Nani Lopez in her soft fat voice. "He thinks he gets away from his cares; but it is not so. Go to the wilderness, you cannot escape fleas."

During dinner conversation was loud and animated. Blanche and Dominga, who were seated opposite to one another, leant their elbows on the table, and screamed across the board in their thin ear-piercing trebles. Dominga volubly related the particulars of a recent social outrage on the part of Mrs. Watkin, whilst Blanche, whose feelings were chiefly on the surface, gave a highly-coloured description of the death of a kid and the illness of a bosom friend.

"I went to see Lucia Mendosa this morning. She looked so, so sick. Well, I declare I was so struck, I fell down on her bed and I cried, and I cried. If anything should happen to thatt girl, I shall *die*; I know I shall."

"What nonsense you talk, child!" protested her grandmother. "Such foolish grief might have frightened the poor creature to death."

"And," broke in Nicky, "though you and Lucia Mendoza are such grand friends now, it is not a month

since you came out here very mad, and talking of going to law, because she had called you bad names."

"If Lucia were to take curdled milk and coriander seed she would soon get arl-right," resumed Mrs. Lopez, "but she should begin it on a Wednesday, it is a lucky day. Mind you tell her," and she looked over at Blanche, and nodded her head impressively.

"Isn't Nani a funny old woman?" said Blanche, suddenly addressing herself to Verona. "Did you ever see anyone like her in England?"

"Now, you don't talk like thatt, Mistress Blanche Jones," interposed the old lady good-humouredly. "Anyhow, I know more of drugs, and cures, and charms, than any old woman she has ever seen. Do you tell us some news!"

Thus invited, Blanche readily poured out all the latest intelligence respecting the forthcoming theatricals, and the race meeting which was to be held after Christmas. A long altercation ensued respecting the prices of tickets, in which Monty, Pussy and Mrs. Chandos took part. Even Granny Lopez threw in a word or two, but Verona and her father remained silent; his thoughts were obviously elsewhere, and as far as the family were concerned, his body might have accompanied them; evidently they were accustomed to his attitude of remoteness. Verona looked at his hollow, expressionless eyes, and wondered what manner of man he might be? His stolid, inert silence had an almost paralysing effect, but she struggled bravely against the sensation, and ventured several remarks on the climate, the wonderful beauty of the surrounding trees and shrubs, the war in South Africa; but to all these efforts the sole response was a brief, monosyllabic reply. She felt repulsed, painfully disappointed, and shrank into herself and silence.

Meanwhile Blanche was retailing to her delighted grandmother the most recent and reliable "cook-house" gossip. She learnt that Mrs. Cotton had had five ayahs in a week, her temper was so furious, and she had got an awfully bad name in the bazaar. The Coopers of the railway had always bragged of their cook, and now he had run away with a lot of money, four fat ducks, and the new water filter.

Then there was a rumour of the other half of the regiment coming from Bhetapore. The colonel's lady and the major's lady did not speak, they had quarrelled about

a dirzee. There were going to be theatricals in Rajapore in race week, a big ball in Lucknow for charity; anyone could go who paid ten rupees.

Blanche merely shrugged her skinny shoulders and married, I don't care for dancing. Give me my evenings at home!"

"Oh, wait till the dances begin in the cold weather," rejoined Mrs. Lopez, "and all the other women go. Oh, I know you! That cat is a Dervish—till the milk comes."

Blanche merely shrugged her skinny shoulders and giggled, then leaning half across the table, said:

"Mother, is it true that the Trotters are always asking that young Smith out, and making a fuss with him and having him to dinner. Do you think Mrs. Trotter wants to marry him to Lizzie?"

"Mrs. Trotter told me yesterday," announced Nani Lopez, resolved not to be thrust out of the conversation, "that it is all foolish talk, and there is nothing in it! but I do not believe her. There is two hundred rupees a month, and free quarters in it; we can all see her plan and the meaning of her good dinners. It is a mountain behind a straw!"

"You will notice your grandmother has a proverb for every occasion," said Mr. Chandos, at last turning to Verona and addressing her. If they were the silent members of the party, they were also to all appearances—the sole Europeans present.

Mrs. Lopez, Mrs. Chandos, Blanche, Pussy, Monty, and Nicky were dark. Even Dominga, for all her white skin, had a peculiar foreign look; there was something alien in the cast of her features, and the shrill tone of her voice.

Monty made little conversation, but an excellent meal; indeed, most of the family ate heartily of mulligatawny, stewed beef and stuffed bunjals, concluding with a quantity of mysterious-looking sweetmeats.

"You must come in and stay with us, and we will show you off," said Blanche, accosting Verona, "I will take you to church and to the club; you will cut out all the officers' wives. My, how they will stare! Oh, goody me!"

"But you cannot have Verona!" protested Dominga, "you have never been able to have Pussy, or me; you know you have no room."

"Oh, I can make room if I *want* to," rejoined Blanche, meeting her sister's gaze with a bold stare.

"Truly you are paid a fine compliment by Mistress Blanche," put in her irrepressible Nani. "She does not care for guests. She likes, as the proverb says, 'Talk in my house—a dinner—in yours.'"

"I will introduce Verona to the railway and the telegraph people," resumed Blanche (wisely ignoring this disagreeable interruption). "We will get up some parties and have lots of jolly fun. Now we will go into the drawing-room, and Verona must hear Dominga sing."

As she spoke, Blanche hurried forward and opened the piano with her own hands. It was a fine instrument, which Mrs. Chandos had picked up a bargain at some sale. Candles were lit, and there was a good deal of bustle and chattering before Dominga trailed over in the new tea-gown, and took her place at the instrument with an air of a *prima donna*.

She played the introduction to Tosti's "Good-bye" with somewhat uncertain fingers, and in another moment the room was ringing with her voice. It was a powerful, elastic soprano, clear and strong, and ill-taught. Undoubtedly a wonderful organ, but it had a strange metallic ring—a native ring; the note of her great-grandmother, who poured forth to the gods her shrill Marathi songs. Whilst Dominga sang, her mother and three sisters sat wrapped in ecstasy. The ladies of the family were unaffectedly proud of the performance, but Mr. Chandos and Monty had disappeared out into the verandah, where they smoked together in guilty company, for Dominga's gift did not appeal to them.

"Well, you've never heard finer singing than that?" and Mrs. Chandos turned to Verona with a challenge in her eye.

"It is indeed marvellous," she assented, "and would, I think, make her fortune if it were trained."

"Trained? Why she has had lots of lessons at school, and practises often an hour a day. I suppose"—with a little sniff—"your voice has been what you call 'trained'?"

"Yes, but mine has so little compass; it is very different from Dominga's."

"But you sing, of course?" said Blanche, who was now busily doing the honours of her mother's house. "Dom,

you get away from the piano"—pulling her sister by the arm—"Verona will take your place."

"Does not Dominga look splendid?" murmured her mother, gazing at her in rapture as she stood up and looked towards them. "Oh, I have always said she only wanted dress. Now you go and sing."

"I feel so diffident about coming after you," said Verona, as she approached the piano, "but they want to hear me."

"Yes, and so do I, I daresay I have some of your songs," replied Dominga, with an air of gracious patronage, and then turning aside, she began to rock among a quantity of tattered, old-fashioned music.

A few songs that were clean and new, Dominga kept exclusively apart, and on one of these Verona noticed that the name of "Dominga Chandos" was inscribed in a bold masculine hand by someone named "Charlie." Finally, failing to discover anything to suit her mezzo-soprano, she sat down and sang from memory the "Sands of Dee."

Verona had an exquisitely sweet, haunting voice, every note was clear, and full and told. When she had removed her hands from the piano, instead of applause, there ensued strange silence. Mowry and his father-in-law were standing inside the door and the face of the latter was working with some irrepressible emotion.

"What a nice little song," exclaimed Mrs. Chandos. "Why," with a sudden start, "here are the Cavaliers," as she descried two figures mounting the steps. "Oh, my goodness, what a bother."

"May we come in?" inquired a high, chirrupy treble, and without waiting for a reply, an elderly woman, wearing a white dress and a black apron walked forward, followed by her husband, a very stout, clean-shaven man with a round bullet head. They were both decidedly dark, but had kind, good-tempered faces, and indeed in Mistress Cavalho's sweet dark eyes there lingered traces of a once renowned beauty.

"We heard Dominga singing," she announced, "so we knew you must have the lamp lit in the drawing-room, and we came over in a friendly way to see"—here she glanced incredulously at Verona—"is this your daughter?" She pronounced it "da-ter."

"Yes."
"Oh, how do you do, Miss. I hope you will like Manera."

"Thank you."

"And here is Pedro, my husband, come to pay his respects."

Pedro gave his stout body a little jerk—doubtless intended for a bow.

"Now, pray do not let us stop the music," accepting a seat on the sofa beside Mrs. Chandos.

"Oh, my! Dominga, you do sing better and better; that last song, it nearly killed me. We waited outside to listen; it sounded like an angel who was shut up in some prison house and breaking her heart; I tell you it squeezed my throat, and Pedro—oh, he gave one great sob." Here Pedro, with a deprecatory grin, suddenly backed into the verandah and the company of his host.

"Oh, I never heard such singing," resumed his wife, with her eyes fixed on Dominga, "my, my, whatt a gift! What pleasure to others." A moment's pause, then, with a sudden laugh, Nicky burst out:

"It was Verona," pointing with a rude forefinger, "Verona, who gave your throat a squeeze, and made old Daddy sob."

Once more there was a silence, this time of a truly painful description. Dominga's face was livid; her mother's mouth was set, and there was an angry sparkle in her eye.

Then Verona, with extraordinary courage and presence of mind, threw herself into the gulf and said:

"It was the pretty air which affected you, Mrs. Cavalho; my voice is very poor in comparison to my sister's."

"Oh, thatt is true," assented her mother with feverish energy, "that is quite true. It is no voice at all—and Dominga you can hear for a mile."

Poor Mrs. Cavalho was sincerely grateful for the explanation, being secretly afraid of Dominga, whose expression had fully justified her alarm; and as a proof of her gratitude to Verona, moved a little closer to her mother, and laying a hand on hers, softly whispered:

"Oh, my dear friend, whatt a lucky woman you are, with your five children around you—and we, that have not one—and this new da-ter, like a queen, the most beautiful of all!"

But Mrs. Chandos gave her chin a contemptuous tilt, shook off the kind little hand, and remarked in a querulous tone:

"Oh, yes, she is all very well now; but when she has had

a couple of hot weathers, she will not be so wonderful, you will see."

But to this melancholy prophecy good Mrs. Cavalho absolutely refused to assent. Dominga, who had succeeded to the piano stool, now favoured the company with two penetrating songs; then a servant appeared with a tray on which was rum (factory rum), water, sweet syrup (home made) and biscuits—a signal that the entertainment was waning.

The community at Manora were early risers, and the guests now began to disperse.

"Do look at grandmamma!" said Blanche as she rose, "she is sound asleep; she does not care for music, only snake-charmers, and tom-toms, and those whining bazaar tunes. Ayah and baby are already in the gharry, and we must be going. Remember I expect you all to tea tomorrow, especially Verona," and after a series of shrill good-byes, parting injunctions, and smacking kisses, the Jones family were once more packed into their hired conveyance, and rattled back to Rajahpore.

"Aré, so they are gone," said Mrs. Lopez, sitting erect, and indulging herself with a prodigious yarn; "that Monty is a stupid owl, and Blanche is still so gay and grand. Well! Well! Well! You know the saying: 'The cow does not find her own horns heavy.' Now I'm going away to my bed."

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In half an hour the whole family had retired, and a profound peace fell upon the bungalow. Verona opened the glass door of her room and stole out, and once more began to pace the path by the river bank.

It was a perfect moonlight night, and oh, what a delightful change from the noise and chatter of the day! The scene was beautiful, all the landscape being outlined in silver; the everyday yellow plain across the water had now a far-away, fairy-like effect. The silence was almost death-like; the hideous cry of the hunting jackal, the scream of a night-hawk, disturbed the night—elsewhere, and the only sound to be heard was the occasional flop of a belated fish. To Verona there was something extraordinarily soothing and grateful in her surroundings, although her head throbbed and ached, and she held her hands to her forehead as she paced up and down. All at once she was aware of something—a faint, distant sound

...what was it? The regular dip of oars coming nearer and nearer; in two or three minutes a white boat rowed by one man shot into sight. As it approached, she perceived that the oarsman, whose curly head was bare, was a sahib, for the moon shone a full dazzling light on his good-looking, determined face. When the boat was almost opposite he leaned for a moment on his oars and called over to her:

"Hullo! Miss Dominga, are you not afraid of the malaria at this time of night?" As Verona made no reply he rowed a stroke nearer, stared hard at her, and then exclaimed with apologetic haste:

"Oh, I beg your pardon; I mistook you for Miss Chandos!" and without another word rowed swiftly away. Verona watched his long, sweeping strokes till he turned a bend in the river, and so was lost to sight.

No doubt this was Dominga's lover; he had a pleasant voice, a fine face, and a stalwart pair of arms.

Dominga was unaccountably fortunate.

CHAPTER XVII

WHILST this genial family party was proceeding in Mr. Chandos's house, a gathering of another description took place in the vicinity.

"The big bungalow," as it was called, was large and luxurious; the furniture modern and tasteful. Mrs. Lepell's frequent journeys to England resulted in many pretty things, such as choice water-colours, bits of quaint silver, fresh chintz covers; then there were soft draperies and screens, books and flowers in profusion.

After dinner three men sat smoking, sipping coffee in the verandah; Mrs. Lepell, in a comfortable chair, and graceful tea-gown, was the only woman present. Her husband, Tom Lepell, a hale man of sixty, had been respected in India for five-and-thirty years; he was reputed to be hard, but just; a stern master and a staunch friend, whose energies were solely devoted to sugar and crops, to goor and rab. Then there was his charming wife, bright, and popular; his wife's nephew, Brian Salwey, superintendent of police in the Rajahpore district. When at headquarters he frequently rowed up the river, and spent an evening with his Aunt Lizzie and Uncle Tom. He had his own room, his own chair, and kept a suit of evening-dress clothes at Manora, for he found favour in the eyes of his well-to-do relations.

Brian Salwey had a pair of steady grey eyes, his features were finely cut, and their expression intelligent; his face was tanned to almost the same shade as his curly locks, his mouth was firm, and his age was thirty. Originally he was intended for the Army, but the idea had been relinquished, and he thought himself exceedingly fortunate to procure a nomination in the Indian police. The billet fitted him like a glove, his profession interested him profoundly; like some young police officers he was an enthusiast, and was one of those men who, putting his hand to the plough, never looks back. Salwey was poor but well-educated, well born, but without social influence.

Being considered a most able officer by the heads of his department, he was naturally dispatched to quite the worst circle in the district. Here he was extravagant in horse-flesh and books; and Bazaar report declared him to be

in love with the Lal Billi (Red Cat); in other words, Dominga Chandos. The fourth individual in the verandah was the little officer to whom Verona had been introduced in Rajahpore station refreshment room.

"The Chandos' are all lit up, and having a grand party," remarked Mr. Lepell. "There was a gharry at the door just now. Out here, we live in our neighbours' pockets, you see."

"I saw such a tragedy there to-day," observed his wife, sitting up and leaning forward, "something that haunts me; a lovely girl"—here she paused and sighed.

"I've not the slightest objection to her haunting *me*," cried Major Gale, with a snigger. "Pray go on."

"I called on the Chandos family, or rather on the daughter from England."

"Oh, by-the-way, yes," interrupted Major Gale, with sudden animation, "I saw her yesterday at the station with the old boy. He looked as if he did not know what on earth to do with her! She is uncommonly handsome, the profile of a cameo, the air of a duchess, and the pride—may I say—of the devil."

"Oh, poor girl," exclaimed Mrs. Lepell, with a little fluttering sigh, "she had not seen her relations *then*."

"No, I assume not," assented Major Gale as he tossed away the end of a cigarette. "I give you my word, she is as white as you are, Mrs. Lepell."

"That is no compliment, for she has a beautiful complexion," was her generous reply, "and I have been twenty years grizzling in India."

"Chandos looked hang-dog, and thoroughly ashamed of himself, as he always does," resumed Major Gale.

"An unfortunate man, I am always sorry for him," remarked Mr. Lepell, speaking for the first time. "I happen to know his history."

"Oh, really, do you?" ejaculated his guest, with the utmost indifference, selecting, as he spoke, a fresh cigarette.

"But what about the girl, Aunt Liz?" said her nephew suddenly, "is she really own sister to my friend Dominga?"

"I think so—indeed, what am I saying? Of course she is; she comes between her and Pussy, and by all accounts is the flower of the flock; adopted as an infant by an enormously rich woman—the schoolfellow of Mrs. Lopez."

"I cannot believe"—here he laughed—"that Mrs. Lopez ever went to school."

"Yes, she did, to Kidderpore. Mrs. Lopez was a beauty once, so was Mrs. Chandos."

"I don't admire beauties of that type."

"Don't you?" exclaimed Mr. Lepell. "I've seen some lovely Nair women on the West coast, handsomer you could not find; slim and graceful, with wheaten coloured skins and perfect features."

"But what about this young lady?" resumed his nephew.

"Oh, she was brought up in England by this old Portuguese woman, who died suddenly without a will. And there was nothing for this girl to do but return to her own relations—whose existence she now discovers for the first time!"

"Well, I call it a tragedy," exclaimed Brian Salwey, "what do you say, Aunt Liz?"

"Yes, I went over to-day, expecting to see another edition of Dominga with European veneer, and discovered a pretty, refined English girl, who has no doubt been accustomed to her maid, her carriage, her French milliner, and any quantity of admiration. She looked completely dazed and bewildered; I found her sisters arrayed in her best frocks, while she held in her arms, with a terrified expression, her black baby nephew, Chandos Montagu Jones! As I let it be clearly understood that my visit was to Miss Verona, she came and talked to me, and they all sat round and gaped upon us with their mouths. Her manner was perfectly ladylike and self-possessed, but once I caught her off her guard, and if ever I saw horror or despair in any human eyes, it was in hers! I suppose she had no idea she was an Eurasian, till yesterday, and will, I am convinced, run away—or do something."

"And can't *you* do something, Aunt Liz?" urged Salwey.

"I certainly will, if I can; but my position is extremely difficult; I am obliged to hold myself aloof, and be friendly with none, otherwise I should get sucked down into the raging whirlpool of Manora politics. First, there is Mr. Chandos, sub-manager, a gentleman, and of indisputably old English family. There are his people, all dark Eurasians, with the exception of Dominga, her mother's idol, whom I particularly dislike; she reminds me of a deadly mechanical toy, harmless to look at, but ready to

explode, unless handled most delicately. Her craving for notoriety, admiration, and pleasure are beyond all words."

"Well, I must say, she is an uncommonly good-looking girl," exclaimed Major Gale, with unexpected fervour.

"Oh, yes—she is handsome, I admit. Then there are the Trotters," continued Mrs. Lepell, "pure Europeans; they despise the Chandos for their taint of native blood; the Chandos family look down on them, as common people—they themselves being gentry. Then there are the dear, good old Cavalhos, and the Watkins; if I showed partiality to one family, I make the others angry and envious. I should like to befriend that poor girl, I know she is most unhappy and desolate, for Mr. Chandos holds himself curiously aloof from his circle, and she has not a creature of her own class to help or to comfort her. Imagine the change, from the petted heiress to fifteen thousand a year, to becoming the odd daughter out, in that *ménage*."

"I have no doubt she wishes she were dead," exclaimed Major Gale. "I should if I were in her shoes. Marianna in the Moated Grange was ten times better off."

"I believe Mother Chan, as they call her, was greatly averse to her joining the family, and for once she showed her sense," remarked Mr. Lepell.

"Yes, but the miserable creature rushed on her fate," added his wife, "she was craving to see her own people, and, above all—her mother."

"Her mother!" repeated Major Gale, with his little cackling laugh.

"And Mr. Chandos himself was urgent," continued the lady, "no doubt he hoped for 'one fair daughter.'"

"The fair daughter having arrived and seen her home, if I'm not mistaken, will never forgive him for his *mésalliance*."

"Poor Chandos," exclaimed Mr. Lepell, "all through his life he has meant well, and done ill; he has made a mull of everything—career, profession, marriage."

"Ah," said Major Gale, standing up and straightening himself, "that is the one pitfall I have eluded."

"Thank you, Major Gale."

"Oh, yes, with all respect to you, Mrs. Lepell, I am a timid man, and there are too many blanks. It is not everyone who is so lucky as Lepell, and draws a great prize." Here Major Gale nodded and smirked; he was rather pleased with the manner in which he had turned this delicate compliment. "There's early parade to-

morrow, and I must be off, Salwey," turning to the policeman, "can I give you a lift back—you are on my road?"

"Thank you, no; my road is by water. I like rowing myself to and fro these moonlight nights."

"Ah, see what it is to be young and romantic!" and having made his polite adieux, the little Major effected a brisk departure.

"No need for *you* to move yet, Brian," urged his aunt, "on such a night as this; I hate the idea of going to bed; I prefer to sit, and laze, and talk, and listen."

"All right, then, I'll stop for half an hour. Oh, I say, Uncle Tom, I'd like to hear something more about that chap Chandos. Is it not extraordinary, a man of his class, and who has been in the Service, settling down here for life, with a half-caste family, and working in the sugar factory?"

"It would seem a great deal more extraordinary, if you knew as much about him as I do," rejoined Mr. Lepell, as he lit another cheroot, crossed his legs, and evidently prepared for narration.

"Why Tom, I never dreamt that you knew his past," exclaimed his wife. "How *close* you have been all these years."

"Oh, but I was never personally acquainted with him, I merely saw him two or three times, but I heard the story. It made rather a stir some eight-and-twenty years ago. He is not aware that I am behind the scenes, and I've not been anything more to him than what you see. In the first place, he would resent any intimacy based on such reminiscences, and, secondly, his family are quite impossible; I'd far rather have to do with the Cavalhos than the Chandos lot, with their pretensions and struggling and greed."

"But tell us more about Mr. Chandos," reiterated his nephew. "I bar the family, too."

"Well, you would never suppose that that thin, worn man, with a melancholy face and downcast air, was one of the cheeriest and best-looking fellows in the Service, and mad about balls, and racing, and sport. When I saw him win the Cup at Lucknow, what an ovation he got! I little anticipated the hero of that day would become my sub-manager, and that the irresistible Adonis, in a blue satin jacket, would develop into a haggard, gaunt auto-

maton, in patched khaki, whose horizon is limited to cane fields, his topics to sacks and sugar mills, goor and fuel. A man who calls me 'sir,' and touches his hat to me daily."

"Now I understand, Tom—why you overlook his irregularity, and ——"

Her husband interposed with a gesture of his hand.

"This Manora has proved his harbour of refuge; here he has been anchored for eighteen years, here he will remain, till the end of the chapter. I mean *his* chapter."

"Unless the new daughter creates a revolution in the family," suggested Salwey.

"On the contrary, the family will alter her. You say," looking at his wife, "that she is fair."

"Yes, entirely a Chandos, and an aristocrat—a pure English girl."

"N—no—nature takes care of that! She has her mother's blood in her veins, her mother's example to drag her under; it will be a mere question of—weeks."

"No, not in this case, Tom," rejoined his wife with brisk decision.

"Why not? My impression, after many years of life in India, is, the fairer an Eurasian the darker their disposition. The duskier their complexion, the whiter their hearts. For instance, compare Dominga to Mrs. Cavalhos; now *she* is a good woman, and a true lady."

"Pray, why should you be so prejudiced against this new Miss Chandos, Tom? You have not even seen her; she will be a success—of that I am convinced."

"Nothing bearing that name has ever come in the way of poor Chandos, nothing but bad luck; he seems to be under the influence of an evil star."

"Scorpio!" suggested his nephew, "in other words, his wife."

"He is a capital sub-manager," resumed Mr. Lepell, "punctual and orderly; has wonderful command over the employees; is a fine disciplinarian, and speaks the language like a native. Latterly, his health is bad."

"And the reason of that is easily understood," said Brian, looking at his uncle with significance.

"Yes, God help him! he takes opium; and I'm afraid the habit is gaining on him; he flies to it, to kill the past—aye, and the present."

"Well, you may think me a brute, but I must say, I don't pity Chandos in the least; he brought all his woes

on himself by marrying a half-caste, a low-bred Eurasian, a money-lender's daughter."

"He has to thank another for his misfortunes."

"Has he?" echoed his wife, in a tone of incredulity. "Well, Tom, we are both dying to hear the history of Mr. Chandos."

"It must be eight-and-twenty years since Paul Chandos come out to India"—a pause—"and has never been home since. He had good looks, good health, good prospects, the younger son of an old family, and seemingly endowed with every gift but a long purse, and the power of uttering the word 'No.' By all accounts, he was full of the wildest spirits, delighted with his first taste of freedom, and his first look at the world; and the world out here was pleased with him. He was in a smart cavalry regiment, among a nice lot of young fellows of his own stamp—perhaps with a little more money than he had. Still he might have managed to hold his own, and be a happy man now—only——"

"For a woman," interposed Brian Salwey.

"No—only for his own cousin. Sydney Chandos was many years older than Paul. He was on the staff out here, and brilliantly clever. He had a splendid figure, a wonderful pair of eyes, and charming smile, but was unscrupulous and base. Thanks to his brains, and manners of extraordinary fascination he managed to pass himself off as not a bad sort; a bit casual, perhaps, and fond of racing and gambling. And in those days, I can tell you, the gambling on the Indian turf was something to make you sit up. Well, this fellow came down to Mhow to spend his leave with his cousin Paul, who was devoted to him, and looked up to Sydney as superhumanly wise and great and good. The poor lad worshipped him slavishly, and thought his idol could do no wrong. Paul, I should say, was an orphan, who had been brought up and educated in his cousin's home. It was not long before he fell entirely under the influence of Sydney, who got him into his power, body and soul. 'Burra' Chandos had, it was whispered, ruined several young fellows, but people expected that he would spare his own cousin."

"And apparently he did not," remarked Mrs. Lepell.

"No, he laughed at his scruples and economies, encouraged him to play cards and gamble; he took him about to races and lotteries—he plunged him into debt. Then he introduced him to the money-lenders,"

"Ah!" ejaculated Brian, "and that naturally *finished* him?"

"Your *bête noir*, eh, Brian?" said his aunt, "whom you hope to finish!"

"Yes," returned Mr. Lepell, "young Chandos backed his cousin's horses and bills, went security for his debts, and got thoroughly entangled in the web of Lopez, a notorious soucar of evil repute."

"I cannot understand any young man, who is not an idiot, being so completely under the thumb of a cousin!"

"Ah, but you did not know that cousin, my dear sir; his cleverness was something appalling; it was downright uncanny; his manners were irresistible. He was a first-class horseman, a notable billiard player, and he sang like an angel: to hear Sydney Chandos singing affecting ballads after a big guest night, where he had been fleecing youngsters and punishing the champagne, was enough to melt the heart of a stone! His voice stood him in the place of an excellent moral character, and he had the art of making you believe every word he said; in fact, his very tones brought conviction. With all his advantages, he was one of the worst young men who ever set foot in India. He was mixed up in a sultry business about a race, but with his damnable art he contrived to pass on the odium to his cousin—along with the greater portion of his debts—and then went gaily home with a light heart, leaving his wretched dupe to his fate! Much of this came out long afterwards, for Chandos was dumb. He was dumb then, he is dumb now. It was suspected in the regiment that Paul had some secret drain on him; he had lost his spirits and appeared to be struggling in a hopeless sea of debt; he sold off all his ponies, he cut down his expenses, he even parted with his watch and guns; in fact, he stripped himself bare, and yet the mountain of debt never seemed to decrease; the interest rose up, and up, and up like a spring tide!"

"Of course; it always does," muttered Salwey.

"He had sworn to his cousin to keep his bill-backing a dead secret; he wrote to his uncle imploring assistance—this was sternly refused. Sydney had his own story to tell of Paul's debts, and shortly afterwards his father died. I believe the poor chap was contemplating suicide, as the only way out of his difficulties, when, at a sergeants' ball, he was presented to Miss Rosa Lopez. She was twenty years of age, the belle of the evening—and by all accounts distractingly pretty."

"That I decline to believe," declared Mrs. Lepell, with emphasis.

"Well, you can please yourself, my dear," rejoined her husband, "but she was handsome. Her complexion was a pale olive; her eyes, teeth, hair, and figure, all most attractive; she danced like a sylph, and fell madly in love with poor, unfortunate Chandos! He was extraordinary good-looking, and no doubt this desperate state of his affairs added a sort of haggard charm to his appearance. I understand she waltzed with him half the night, and subsequently made all the advances, daily throwing herself in his way, and writing him notes. He was a reckless young fellow, and a chivalrous fool. He, it seemed, had always been his aunt's good boy, and brought up under her influence; this, which made him sensitive, quixotic, and truthful, had earned him the secret ill-will and envy of his cousin.

"By-and-by, it transpired that Rosa's father, Juan Lopez, was unfortunately but too well known to Lieutenant Chandos. Miss Rosa was an ambitious girl, strong-willed, passionate, and desperately in love with the handsome young cavalry officer. Her father was easily enlisted on her side, and was prevailed upon to make an offer to Rosa's lover. He proposed to release Paul Chandos from his debts and bonds, provided he made Rosa Lopez his wife.

"At first, I am told that Chandos indignantly refused, but every day pressure became heavier and heavier—Rosa was so seductive and so devoted. Chandos had taken no one into his confidence, his debts and disgrace were not his—but another's. Vainly his brother officers endeavoured to help him, but Chandos, the cheery and genial, had become glum, secluded, and mute; and once or twice his friends had been puzzled at seeing him driving in a brougham with a dark, foreign-looking man; then, all at once the secret was out. He had married the daughter of Lopez, the notorious moneylender—and Lopez had cancelled his debts!"

"Poor devil," muttered Salwey.

"The regiment was furious, but this did not affect the happy pair, who were spending the honeymoon in Cashmere. Of course, Chandos was compelled to send in his papers, and within about twelve months the police discovered a series of financial frauds, and Juan Lopez was obliged to leave the country—that is to say, to fly to Pondicherry—where he died.

“ ‘ Chotah ’ Chandos was now minus a profession, and plus not only a wife, but a mother-in-law. Another man would have bolted, and fled to Australia; but he stood fast, and, for a time, lived in the hills, on the sale of his commission; then, as his nursery increased, he was forced to rouse from his apathy and look round for employment. After being for some time on a Government stud farm, he eventually drifted here; in fact, I heard of his plight and offered him the billet.”

“ And what about his people at home? ” inquired Mrs. Lepell.

“ His uncle and aunt were dead, and his other relations with one accord washed their hands of him. When he married Rosa Lopez and left the Service, he had figuratively cut his throat.”

“ How does he put in his time? ” inquired Salwey. “ He has no associates, for he never mixes with his equals, and shuns all soldier men like the plague.”

“ I think he reads a good deal, and he gardens a little, but I fancy that his life is one long purgatory; he has nothing in common with his household.”

“ What an existence! ” ejaculated the police officer; “ perhaps the new member will be a comfort to him? ”

“ Cold comfort, I should say; but he may live on hope, for he is a Chandos of Charne, and may possibly be a rich man some day. His cousin is childless.”

“ Do, pray, imagine Mrs. Chandos in England! ” exclaimed Mrs. Lepell. “ How I should like to see her mixing in county society—mincing about on her tip-toes, and conversing in high Chi-Chi, wouldn’t you, Brian? ” turning towards her nephew, who sat with his cigar out, his hands clasped behind his head and his eyes fixed on the distance.

As he made no reply, his aunt continued:

“ My dear, you are in a brown study! ”

“ If you mean that I am thinking of Mrs. Chandos—I am *not*.”

“ Then a penny for your thoughts! ”

“ I was thinking of that girl,” he said, rising and stretching himself, “ an heiress in the beginning, a penniless Eurasian now. What will her end be? ”

“ Ask me that question in a year’s time, and now, Brian, it is twelve o’clock, your bark is on the tide, if you don’t go soon, your bearer will be paddling up here to know what has become of you? ”

CHAPTER XVIII

VERONA was now painfully conscious that she could no longer harbour illusions, and had begun to realise her situation, her relations and her home. Her home, large, dark, straggling, with an atmosphere close and airless, the handsome furniture, picked up at auctions—dead bargains, surrounded by a deep verandah and a bushy garden, full of old apricots, cork trees, dried-up water channels, straggling rose bushes, beds of tomatoes and a few sickly orange trees.

She understood and conformed to the daily routine of the household. There was the scrambling breakfast at nine o'clock, at which neither her father nor grandmother appeared. The latter partook of coffee and "hoppers" in the seclusion of her own quarters, and busied herself with the feeding of fine buff fowl, making coffee and condiments, and giving audience and medicine to numbers of native visitors, chiefly the sick and afflicted. Dominga, her red mane in two thick plaits, wearing a dressing-gown and slippers, practised her songs, knitted ties, wrote letters, or lay on her bed, devouring novels and bazaar sweetmeats—such as paras and jalabies—having commandeered the sole punkah coolie.

Pussy and Nicky were unaffectedly idle, but Mrs. Chandos, on the other hand, was feverishly busy, whisking in and out of the rooms, herding the servants here and there, scolding every one in her high, far-reaching falsetto. Twelve o'clock was the orthodox visiting hour, and three days after Verona's arrival it brought Mrs. Trotter, Miss Lizzie Trotter, Miss Georgina Louisa Trotter in all their best clothes, to make a formal call. Mrs. Trotter, a worthy, hard-working woman, who always declared that "she knew her place and kept to it," had a round, flat face, resembling a bread platter, the idea being well carried out by a toque in tussore silk.

She was obviously abashed on her first introduction to the new Miss Chandos, and stared at her with genuine surprise, but Susan Trotter very soon rallied and found her tongue, and taking a good grip of her self-possession, began:

"You and I, Verona——"

Verona started.

"——have more in common than all the other members

of your family—as we had both been in England; I,” she bridled, “of course was born there,” and she looked round the room. “You,” to Verona, “were born out here—whereabouts?”

Verona glanced at her mother interrogatively.

“Oh—in Murree,” she answered sharply, then exclaimed:

“My! whatt a long time since Mrs. Trotter has been in England; she will not know it as you do, Verona. Twenty-five years, is it not?”

“Yes,” assented Mrs. Trotter with obvious reluctance.

“So Lizzie was born at home? And that makes her at least twenty-seven,” and Mrs. Chandos closed her eyes, as much as to say “I have scored.”

“Lizzie is twenty-six next birthday; she looks just as young as Dominga, but that is because she is English.”

“I suppose you were awfully gay in England?” said Lizzie, now addressing Verona for the first time.

“Yes, but we lived chiefly abroad,” replied Verona.

“And in grand, smart society,” announced Mrs. Chandos; “princes and dukes and all that sort of thing.”

“There is not much of that sort of thing out here; you will only know the railway people, and contractors and such like,” remarked Mrs. Trotter. “I suppose London is a good deal changed since I was there; I remember going Underground and thinking it so wonderful.”

“That is an old story now,” rejoined Verona with a smile; “there is the Tube.”

“And the Crystal Palace and Madame Trousseau’s” (she meant Tussaud’s), “with the murderers in the basement. What a sight!—Oh!” with a start, “here is Mrs. Watkins; I thought she was coming, for I saw her ayah shaking out her best dress—so now I will go, as at present we do not speak.”

Enter Mrs. Watkins, a young woman, pale, very stiff, and smartly dressed. She stared at Verona with cold inquisitive eyes, and chiefly confined her conversation to the climate. The lady was—as Pussy had hinted, “stuck up,” but although there was some conversation with respect to flowers, she had no opportunity to introduce the two gardeners.

A proper sequel to these morning calls was a visit to Blanche in the afternoon. Mrs. Chandos excused herself,

but Verona and Pussy started off in the victoria to spend a happy afternoon in Rajahpore!

The residence of Mrs. Montagu-Jones was a trim little red brick bungalow, with a shallow verandah, covered with purple railway creeper. Everything looked precisely as it was—or had been—cheap; everywhere was evident, audacious apings at style and at fashion; everywhere ugly adjective “make-shift” obtruded itself with heartless prominence. There were scrumpy cretonne curtains in the windows; sixpenny fans and brackets on the walls; unreliable flounced cane chairs, a gaudy European carpet and many rickety tables crowded the drawing-room.

Quite a number of guests had been specially invited to meet Miss Verona Chandos at tea, and ladies connected with the railway, commissariat and telegraph departments were well to the fore; smart, dark young men, slender and and effusive; gaily dressed women, their faces covered with powder and reeking of sickly scents.

As Verona looked round the company she asked herself what she would have thought of this society a year ago? Of Mrs. De Castros, in a black crêpe hat trimmed with poppies, who drank loudly from her saucer, and put her tongue out at a friend; of Mistress Thomas, elaborately painted, wearing a very low white gown and a transparent blouse; of young Braganza Brown, the beau of the party, in a florid waistcoat with silver buttons, and a pink satin tie, scented and oiled like some ancient Roman dandy. Pussy was undoubtedly in her element, and giggled and talked incessantly, for she was a social favourite.

“Fie! For shame! Pussee, whatt a noise you are making,” expostulated Blanche. “Do be quiet.”

“Oh, Pussy,” cried a girl leaning over and addressing herself to her, “Dom is too grand to look at me now; she is always in the station; they say she will marry an officer. Whatt do you think?”

“Arè Bap! don’t ask me,” cried Pussy; “ask Dom.”

“But I dare not. I hear Dom will sing at the concert,” resumed the girl; “we shall go and hear her, and pay eight annas. Whatt a voice; where *did* she get it? where does she keep it?”

“But I do not like it,” interposed Ada Diaz; “it is so big, it hurts my head; and tell us, Pussy, who is the little officer so awfully in love with Dom?”

“I believe it is quite a case!” added another uneasily.

"Oh, I don't know," said Pussy, helping herself to sweets. "There is often some one in love with her, but she is so hard to please; she has such grand notions."

On the other hand Blanche was saying:

"Mother has so many engagements; she is going to buy another horse; one was enough for *me*, but she never grudges anything for Dominga; every one knows that. Now, Verona, do you come along; we are going to the railway tennis ground, and Mr. Bott wants you to play with him."

Mr. Bott, a stout dark man, was the chief guest—and perfectly alive to his own importance. As Blanche pulled her sister's sleeve, she whispered, with a smothered giggle:

"Five hundred rupees a month! He is baby's godfather, but you may marry him if you like!" and she pushed Verona before her.

What an afternoon it had been—of pretension and make-believe, of civil speeches and staring eyes, of long whispers and sidelong looks, and of warm invitations, and strokings and flattery and painfully sustained effort.

Verona was thankful when she and Pussy were at last ushered to the overworked victoria and driven home along the flat, white road to the sequestered bungalow in Manora; which now appeared to the miserable pleasure-goer a veritable harbour of refuge.

The morning succeeding this dissipation, found Verona lying on her bed racked with a headache and fever; she was unable to rise, and lay prone, fervently hoping that she was going to be very ill and die. In the midst of these miserable reflections, Pussy burst in to announce:

"Rona, this is Sunday: we cannot all fit into the victoria, but you and Dominga and mother must go to the cantonment church; there is a grand parade—you will see the officers!"

"I cannot stir," protested Verona; "my head aches so dreadfully."

"Ah," coming over and taking her hand, "so you have fever. Now I wonder how you got that?" (By midnight rambling on the river banks when the air was full of mist and malaria).

For two long days Verona remained in her room, her head burning, her bones racked with pain. She was driven nearly distraught by affectionate Pussy's well-meant attendance and tireless chatter, by Dominga, who sat upon her bed and poured forth a stream of questions

(questions respecting dress, deportment, hair-dressing, letter-writing, and the manners and customs of society at home); by Nicky, whose carpentering was close at hand, and by the ceaseless barking of the Trotters' pariah.

On the third night she got up—finding herself alone—put on a dressing-gown and slippers, and staggered about the room; then she tottered out to contemplate the river.

Oh, how cool it looked! And she was burning—her veins ran fire. How delightful to slip into it, and thus end her life; she was useless now to herself—or any one. From her former existence she was separated by a great gulf; her new existence was intolerable. To her relations she was an encumbrance, and to her they were a nightmare.

She stole further and stared about her. There was the light in the office window; between it and her a stooping head. The recent rains had filled the Jurra to its brim. As it flowed past muttering to itself in the moonlight it looked most enticing. The river spirit seemed to whisper in her ear with seductive, rippling murmur:

"Come with me! Come with me!"

Only a little choking feeling and all would be over! Drowning, people said, was such an easy death. "Why wait?" urged the rippling river; in two minutes from this very time, she might be elsewhere, safely landed on the other shore. She must cross the River of Death sometime—why not now? It would not be wrong; on the contrary, it would be a blessed relief to everyone, including herself. Oh, why should people speak of suicide with bated breath and horror?

"Oh, it is not wrong," she said aloud; "God knows all. He will forgive me. *God pardon and give me rest,*" she exclaimed, and raising her arms, she stepped down to the water's brink; suddenly a boat shot up close to the steps, a white figure rose before her, a firm, peremptory hand was laid on her wrist.

"Surely you would not bathe at this hour?" remonstrated a man's voice.

She drew a long, shuddering breath and moaned:

"Oh, let me go! Let me go!"

"Are you not afraid of crocodiles?" he asked.

"Crocodiles," she stammered, and began to laugh; "crocodile, no, it's in my dressing bag!"

"You must go back to the house at once, and promise to remain there," continued the stranger authoritatively. "Your arm is burning—you have fever."

"But who are you?" she asked; "are you the Angel of Death? Is this the boat to take me over? Oh, I am so thankful you have come," and she gazed into his face, her eyes ablaze with fever. "Oh, Angel of Death, I am not afraid; let us go," and she prepared to enter the boat. "Let us go now."

"No, no, no!" protested Salwey, in a voice so persuasive and gentle as to sound like that of another person. "I cannot take you over this time; the current is too strong."

"Oh, do, please; I cannot stay. Oh! I cannot wait!" and she wept and wrung her hands with a gesture of frantic despair. "Well, then I must go alone," and as she spoke, she thrust him aside with all her feeble might.

It was not often that Brian Salwey found himself in such a dilemma—although it was by no means the first time that he had indirectly represented the Angel of Death. If he left this distracted girl in order to seek for assistance she would drown herself without a doubt. After considerable delay and many solemn and astounding lies he induced her to believe that he truly was the Angel Azrael and would return for her, without fail, on the following evening. Having made this smooth and mendacious promise he "charmed so wisely" that he prevailed upon Verona to re-enter her room. He then fastened the door outside, in a makeshift fashion, with his handkerchief and necktie, and ran at top speed in order to summon his aunt.

CHAPTER XIX

MRS. LEPPELL was about to retire for the night when her nephew, almost breathless, dashed into the verandah.

"Oh, what is it?" she asked, "Dacoits, or fire?"

"It is that girl, Aunt Liz, Miss Chandos, she was going to throw herself in the river; you were quite right when you said she would do something. As I was going home, I noticed her on the bank carrying on in a rum sort of way, and tossing her arms about. So I rowed up pretty close, and was just in time to stop her from jumping into the water. I have persuaded her to return to her room, on the sole understanding that I am the Angel of Death, and am coming to fetch her to-morrow. I want you to hurry over at once—this moment—and get someone to look after her."

"Why, of course, I'll go myself."

In another moment Mrs. Lepell was calling for her cloak and shoes, and she and her nephew were running—followed by an ayah and a peon—in the direction of Chandos Koti.

A visit from Mrs. Lepell at twelve o'clock at night! Was the world coming to an end?

Mrs. Chandos appeared fully dressed, alert, and lamp in hand, to be informed that her daughter Verona had been wandering on the river bank in a high fever, quite off her head!

"Oh, Madre di Dois! Whatt a trouble that girl does give," and she put down the lamp and threw up her hands, "whatt a bother! and trouble."

"You should see to her at once, there is not a moment to be lost," urged Mrs. Lepell, "or shall I go?"

"No; oh, I will go, you wait here."

Presently Mrs. Chandos returned and calmly announced to the couple in the verandah that "it was arl-right, Verona could come to no harm, for she lay on the floor in a dead faint."

"Shall I go into Rajahpore for the doctor," suggested young Salwey.

Mrs. Chandos looked at him quickly—one swift glance of irrepressible hate.

"No, no, no!" she replied, "my mother knows all the fever cures, it is only that the girl is out from home,

and not accustomed to the climate. It is nothing but the bad season and the rains. In a few days she will be arl-right. Thank you so much. Good-night," and with a wave of her lantern, and an abrupt nod, the two good Samaritans found themselves somewhat cavalierly dismissed.

In spite of her mother's cheering diagnosis, for days Verona lay at the point of death; indeed, she certainly would have died, but for the valuable offices of old Mrs. Lopez, who thrust Mrs. Chandos and her daughters out of the sick room, and took the duties of nurse upon herself.

What a pitiful object the poor girl looked, with her sunken cheeks, lips cracked with fever, and cumbersome masses of dark hair. Now she moved her head from side to side, beating her burning hands upon the counterpane, muttering and moaning—often in a foreign tongue.

It was some time before the concoctions of her grandmother brought Verona round—these were simples of her own manufacture, and in the end proved efficacious. The good woman imported her charpoy into a corner of Verona's room, and scarcely left her patient night and day. In fierce and fluent Hindustani she kept the entire family at bay, and by-and-by, having no other company, Verona came to know and love her unwieldy, old, half-caste "Nani." As she lay there convalescent in the dim light, Mrs. Lopez unfolded to her ear many a curious Indian tale; but occasionally the conversation was of a more personal description.

"Of course, I know you are not content," said Nani, "for it is all so strange now, but you are young, and you will be gay enough yet. Fill your life with good deeds, and that will make you happy. Once upon a time I, too, was miserable; now I am so busy with other folk's troubles, I have no time to think of my own; when I was young, I was married to Lopez, the money-lender. I was very pretty. Oh, you will laugh, but it was true! I had yards of red hair like Dominga, and good eyes. Then when I grew fat and ugly, Lopez no longer cared for me; all his thought was of money—money—money—always. He used to lend to the young officers, and the Zemindars, and the bazaar people. But he was never satisfied with what he got—and he got much—he was always reaching—reaching—reaching after more. Rosa, your mother, would be like him, if she had the rupees; oh, she is so fond of

accounts and business. Lily, my other girl, was quite different—but she is dead. Ah! that was my great sorrow. Sometimes, when I looked at you lying there, so seek, with your black hair, thin hands, and white face, I could have thought it was my own poor Lily. I think that is why I talk to you, and—tell you things. Lily was very soft and gentle, not clever and quick like your mother, who always knows what she wants—and *will* get it. *She* says I am too friendly with native people, and the ayah, but, why not? They are all flesh and blood, and some of them are *so* good."

"Yes," assented her listener, languidly, "are they?"

"Now, there is the ayah, for instance, Zorah; she had a husband, and slaved hard for him, and had beautiful gold jewels, and brass cooking pots, and money, for she was always working, working, working. Then she went to England, with a lady, for two or three months, and when she came back—now, what do you think? That good-for-nothing man had run away with all her things, and married another wife! and so she had to begin life all over again. She is old now, and very poor indeed; all she had in the world was a silver chain. A niece of hers was ill-treated by her husband's family—because she had no children, so they beat her, and starved her—and made her a slave. And Zorah sold her silver chain, and went and brought her here from a long way off, a journey costing twenty rupees, and keeps her; and all she has is five rupees a month—now, would you or I do that?"

"I expect *you* would, grandmother."

"You, too, if you had the money; you have the generous eyes. I am sorry you gave your gold to Abdul Buk; I do not trust him, but in your mother's opinion he is great and wise; she and I sometimes do not like the same people. For instance, I like Salwey, the police officer; he is a just man, and lives a good life; he is kind to Nicky and takes notice of that poor boy; but your mother hates him more than anyone in the whole world, I think. She says he is her enemy. I cannot understand that. But if that is true, 'Better a wise enemy, than a foolish friend,' is it not so?"

"But why is he her enemy?"

"Ah, I cannot tell you. It must be a secret between her and him. I know that some of the city people have an

ill-will to Salwey—he lives among foes, like a tongue among teeth.” Just at this moment the door was lashed violently open, and Mrs. Chandos, followed by Dominga and Nicky, entered the room without ceremony. “There has been a robbery,” announced Mrs. Chandos, who was evidently in a condition of extraordinary excitement.

“Not of fowl?” cried Mrs. Lopez, struggling to her feet.

“No,” burst in Nicky, “all Verona’s things—her jewellery I mean.”

“Now why you come telling these tales now, while the poor girl is so seek?” cried her grandmother, “go away, all of you—go away.”

“Oh, but I must tell her!” said Mrs. Chandos, turning to Verona, “I locked up that bag, you know, in the press in the Duftah. Just now I go; the lock is not broken, but the top is off the press—and the jewellery is stolen out of the bag.”

“All?”

“Well, the gold watch and chain, the bangles and rings, and the beautiful necklace. Oh! my! my! my!” and she put her hands to her head. “What villains people are! Whatt wickedness! Whatt shall I do?”

“Send for the police,” suggested Verona, in a weak whisper.

“Pah! the police!” cried Mrs. Chandos, “they are torturers and murderers—if you wait for them you will never see your things. They come—they walk about—they stare, then they take away the servants; they pull the men’s beards, the pinch the women, they make all to eat sweetmeats, which cause awful thirst, and give no water, till they confess—lies. Che-a-ah! the police!” and she paused breathless.

“Then get a magic wallah,” suggested Nani, “they are clever and good, and give no trouble.”

“The police are very sharp now,” urged Nicky, “they have discovered lots of things, thanks to Salwey. Why not have Salwey up? I will go and fetch him!”

“Salwey!” screamed his mother, “who asks your advice?—and the milk not dry on your lips. Send for Salwey”—and she looked around her fiercely—“I would just as soon send for the devil!” and with this formidable announcement, she quitted the room.

CHAPTER XX

THE rains were unusually late, and continued unabated till the end of September, with brief intervals of steamy heat. It was owing to this circumstance that the "new Miss Chandos," as she was called, was such a long time recovering her strength: in spite of her grandmother's unflagging attendance, she appeared to have arrived at a certain point of convalescence and there stuck fast. Sickness had brought an obliteration of her troubles, but she was still sunk in a gulf of weakness.

Mrs. Lopez plied her with her most potent remedies (she was acquainted with some of the subtle herbs and invaluable native secrets unknown to the European pharmacopœia), and several of her hitherto infallible charms, without any obvious result. The truth was that the old woman had to contend with the young girl's will—Verona had no desire to recover. One afternoon as she lay in a sort of apathetic languor, listening to the rain streaming down the gutters, pouring on the stone verandah and beating on the big banana leaves with a steady "Drum, drum, drum," her Nani entered a little wet and out of breath, carrying some small object in her hand.

"Aré! Bai! see what I have got for thee! a baby squirrel to keep thee company. We found him just now, washed out of the nest; all his sisters and brothers are drowned, but the life is yet in him."

As she spoke Nani unfolded a morsel of red flannel and proudly displayed a half-drowned squirrel (it looked like the proverbial rat). She was about to hand it to Verona, who drew back with an instinctive shudder, but when two little black eyes, full of terror, met her own, she took the creature and proceeded to dry it very gently, and then cover up the small, shivering body.

"Oh, ho! we will call him 'Johnny,' and make him a pet," announced Nani, who presently fetched a bit of sponge and some warm milk and proceeded to feed him. She was wonderfully expert in rearing nondescript orphans, such as kids, kittens and young parrots.

Warmed and fed, Johnny crept up the sleeve of Verona's flannel jacket, and there slept the sleep of exhausted infancy. For the first day or two he was weakly and timid, and whenever he was startled immediately sought

refuge up Verona's sleeve! But he throve; he was promoted from a bit of sponge to an egg-spoon and a morsel or rice, and in a short time Johnny began to realise himself, to flit about the room, to dress his fur and to take an interest in his personal appearance! And Johnny gave Verona something to think of, and attract her thoughts outwards; he did her ten times more good than her grandmother's most warranted charm. She and Johnny had something in common; and when she felt the forlorn little animal trembling in her sleeve, she recognised that here was a fellow sufferer, who like herself, was despairing and desolate in the midst of unfamiliar surroundings. Verona and Johnny became fast friends; at the sound of her call he would dart to her side, no matter how absorbing his occupation. He was seeing the great big world for the first time from the splendid vantage ground of a back verandah!

Nani—as already mentioned—slept in her granddaughter's room. She also not infrequently took her meals there, and her manner of eating was a complete revelation to the beholder, who never wearied of the spectacle. Nani loved curry and rice—oh, such curry and rice as never was tasted on sea or shore in the Western hemisphere! The meal was served in two bowls—the curry, consisting of pieces of meat or fowl, thick rich yellow gravy, charged with all manner of spices and condiments, *so* hot. Verona once ventured to taste a mouthful, and the result was a gasping, a spluttering, and several irrepressible tears. For here was the real true and only curry (no English make-believe), but such as was eaten by the natives on the West Coast. One bowl contained the notable comestible, and the other was filled with flaky rice. Into the curry Mrs. Lopez plunged a plump and eager hand, seized a morsel, then she dipped the same hand into the rice; in a moment it became a neat and shapely ball; the next instant it had disappeared for ever in her mouth.

Nani continued the process until both bowls were empty, not a trace of curry or even a grain of rice remained. It was all assimilated with extraordinary dexterity and despatch. When the meal had ended and the bowls had been removed, Nani would declare:

“After such food one can seat oneself like a king! Now, that is how we are intended to eat; it is the best way, and see, I make no mess—no more than you and your

bread and butter. I can use a knife and fork as well as any one, but the fingers are best. Wash them, and there is no trouble. Some day you will like it too, child."

But Verona only shook her head and smiled incredulously.

"How old are you, Nani?" she asked.

"Not so old as you think—about sixty three, and how life flies. 'It is as a swift horse passing a crevice,' so says the proverb. It seems but yesterday, and I was young."

"You must have seen some strange things, Nani."

"Oh, yess; thatt is so," assented Mrs. Lopez, with gentle deliberation.

"What sort of things—do tell me?"

"Well, I have seen an enchanted well; this is true, true, true. No matter how the water failed, it was always full. When the rains came it remained just as before—never overflowed, the water always stopping in the same place. All the learned people see it and marvel. I have also seen a Mahommedan missionary preaching in the city to a crowd of English soldiers; also I have seen strange people in the bazaar too—Europeans who became natives, and forgot their own speech and country."

"Oh, Nani—no!"

"Yes, it is true, especially in the old days. Some went into the bazaar and they never came out. I remember one—oh, such a fine, straight, strong man; he was a tent lascar and Mahommedan, at seven rupees a month. People thought he was a Punjaubi—he was so fair—but I knew he was an Englishman by his eyes. He came from a place called York-shire. He had a pretty wife—a lascar's daughter. He was happy. Oh, yess."

"Do you remember the Mutiny, Nani?"

"Why not, when I was twenty years of age, and married? We were in Bombay, then."

"And you say nothing of it?"

"Truly I did, child; for four months after the massacre, I, who speak to you, stood within the Bee-Bee Ghur itself."

"What was that?"

"Whatt! You not know? the ladies' house in Cawn-pore, the bungalow where the butchers cut them to pieces."

"Why were you there, Nani?"

"Child, you may ask! Lopez had business up country: in those days he took me about, for he was proud of me.

He stopped at Cawnpore—he had an agent there, and he wanted to see the bungalow, ‘the ladies’ house,’ where two of his own cousins were there murdered. Oh yess, and so we went; such a common old shabby place—just two large rooms. We went in—many were there too, talking in whispers. The walls—oh, I wept when I looked—they were covered with writing, prayers and bits of hymns and loving messages and good-byes and names. Yes, the walls were white once; but oh, Bapré Bap! such awful splashes, and high up in one place, the full mark of a great red hand; and the floor—though all washed, looked black. The room seemed damp and full of horrors and fear and death. Oh, no, no, I could not stay, like Lopez! No! no! no! in two minutes I had run out, and there before me was the well. Yes, they were all down there, and the top was bricked over. I could scarcely see for crying, but I hid away behind a little wall and fell down. Oh, I could not help it, and prayed for those souls, so cruelly, cruelly put to death. My child, I did not get over that day for long years; it haunts me now. As I speak to you, I can see it, and staring out at me from the wall, the—hand—the—butcher’s hand!”

“Oh, Nani—don’t!” protested her listener. “I can almost see it too!”

“Well, we will not talk of that time any more, for in my veins I have both the blood of those who killed at Cawnpore, and those who blew them from the guns. My grandfather was an English officer, and we—we will say no more. Let there be peace. Let us try and forget—and for a sick child such talk is not good.” Nani paused and remained silent for some time. Then she said abruptly:

“But see, here is the crystal!”

As she uttered the word “crystal,” she drew from some mysterious receptacle an article resembling a glass paper-weight.

“Now I will tell your fortune!”

“What is the use, Nani? It is told,” protested Verona, wearily.

“What nonsense, child!” looking at her sharply; “the best part of your life is to come.”

Her granddaughter gave a faint, incredulous laugh.

“No, do not speak one word. I must look and be quiet for an hour. I have to fix my mind.”

Verona, thus silenced, summoned Johnny to play with her. He was a pretty little fellow, the ordinary verandah squirrel of India—grey, with a broad brown stripe down his back. He came at once, and sat on the table beside her, and trimmed his whiskers. Presently he crept into his old quarters—her sleeve—where he lay motionless for a long time; perhaps he knew that the fate of his beloved lady was at that particular moment trembling in the balance; perhaps he was merely sleepy, being still a baby.

"Aré! Aré! whatt this is arl about I cannot say," proclaimed Nani after an hour's silent contemplation, "I have seen strange things, child, and a change that is coming to you—not death, not marriage. You look at me—I see your face, and it smiles and—fades. No, no, no; it is of no use! Yet this is a lucky day, and the omens are good. I met this morning first thing, Mrs. Trotter—a mother of sons—what could be better?"

"Never mind, Nani—I have no luck."

"Well, you have something—I cannot understand; a veil hangs over your future. Now with Dom it is so easy, and Dom believes in the ink-pool of the crystal."

"Does she?"

"To her you see it tells of a great uplifting—she stands with a light around her. This may mean one of two things—a place above others, or a violent death. Dom is a strange creature—she has strange blood in her veins. She is all for herself. Only you notice, Dom will say: 'So and so, he likes me;' 'there's So and so, she adores me;' but never 'I like this one, or that one.' Dom likes only Dom," and Nani nodded with melancholy emphasis.

"She has a handsome, witch-like face, and such a clever head—but of whatt use here, I say to myself. What avails a mirror to a blind man? She can never go beyond Manora—no? She will marry into the railway, like Blanche, for all her cravings."

"Nani, I wonder why my father ever came here?"

"Because he had no choice, child."

"You remember him as a young man?"

"Why, of course. I remember as yesterday when I saw him. Oh, so handsome and straight, and fair—who would think it now? And Rosa, she was dying for him. Oh, she *would* have him! What she wills ever comes to pass. It were better she had never seen him. It is not always lucky to have one's wishes granted—and the omens were bad. His cousins debts chained him here,

but his heart was in Europe. All his thoughts are there still—he changeth not. You know the proverb—‘Bury a dog’s tail for twenty years, it will still be crooked.’ ”

“Why is he always so sad—and silent, Nani?”

“I know not the very truth, but often have I said to him:

‘Gaiety is the support of the body,
But sadness makes it to grow old.’

You too are sad, always, child. Why is it so? Come, now, tell your old Nani?”

Verona made no reply, but hid her face in her hands, and shuddered convulsively from time to time. Johnny, vaguely alarmed, ran down her sleeve, peeped out and fled; but not a moment too soon—for the second time in his short life he had escaped a deluge! On this occasion—of tears. Bodily weakness, weariness, misery caused this sudden outbreak, to the amazement and alarm of Nani; and despite her expostulations and ejaculations, Verona wept till she sank into a sort of stupor, and so passed into the land of dreams.

CHAPTER XXI

WE have seen how Verona was affected by her relations, it now remains to exhibit the other side of the shield and to describe her relations, and how they were affected by Verona.

First of all, Paul Chandos, her father. To him her society—little as he appeared to appreciate it—was a pure and unalloyed delight. During many years he had acquired the habit of silence, and although sufficiently fluent in the factory, at home he was a dumb man; whilst Verona was pained and mortified by his still tongue, on his side (as he gave her his wistful yet stealthy attention) he was conscious of inexpressible happiness. Here beside him sat the embodiment of his lost youth, lost ideals, aye, and it might have been his lost love! The sound of the girl's high-bred accent, the delicate shape of her face, her air of repose and refinement, recalled the tender grace of a day that was dead, and the sound of a voice that was still. Still, as far as he was concerned—never whilst he lived would it again fall on his ears. Nevertheless, he kept, from sheer force of habit, all this enjoyment to himself, and his pale, unhappy daughter had not the faintest reason to suppose that for him, she had momentarily swung back the gates of the Elysian fields. When Paul Chandos had realised his cousin's infamy, and beheld him as he was—a cruel, base, unprincipled wretch—the result was a shock, which morally stunned him for the remainder of his days. On the altar, before his cousin Sydney, he had laid all that was best in his disposition—Faith, Hope, Charity—but a fire had ascended and reduced his offering to ashes. The horror of this experience had almost turned his brain.

As soon as Sydney had succeeded his father in the family estates, Paul had written him a letter, indited, so to speak, in his heart's blood—a letter reminding him of debts, dues, and of solemn vows, and imploring him, for the sake of his dead mother, to extend a hand and draw him out of the pit of despair—a pit into which Sydney had plunged him. To this, Captain Chandos (late Blue Light Lancers), D.L., of Charne Hall, Flatshire and Charlton Terrace, replied:

"SIR,—You have disgraced your family by your abominable marriage—we look upon you as dead. Further communications will be destroyed unread.

"Yours faithfully,

"S. CHANDOS."

Thus Paul had sacrificed himself to pay his cousin's debts—and especially one old debt, not entered in any ledger—the debt of jealousy. The late Mrs. Chandos had been passionately attached to her orphan nephew; he was her darling, and she had "understood" her son.

At one time, the unhappy victim had contemplated making a desperate effort for release, of going home (steerage) and appealing to his relations—and the law.

"But of what use?" urged despair. "The debts were in his own name—the rope was round his neck; his hands were bound—it was exile for life."

The unfortunate man gradually realised that he had no choice but to settle down and make the best of his lot. By degrees he had grown terribly apathetic, and, also, he had become bitterly ashamed of his family. Nevertheless, he toiled for them incessantly, like an ox in a sugar mill, but now and then human nature asserted itself, and the miserable automaton felt that he must have some relief—or succumb. He was not a human being, but a mechanism under a pith helmet. Paul Chandos found his sole consolation in dreams. Occasionally he read in the papers the names of former associates, his school-fellows and brother officers. Oh, how he envied them! One was a famous soldier, another a diplomatist, a third a writer—and what was he?—a worm, and no man. With abject horror he shrank instinctively from whatever recalled his former profession; he never entered the cantonment, and the chance sound of a gun, the sight of a mounted officer clanking by, was like the sudden pressure on some aching nerve. With respect to his domestic affairs, he both hated and feared his wife—precisely as a captive animal hates and fears a cruel keeper. She was strong, and he felt himself to be helpless. His daughter Dominga inspired him with a peculiar mixture of mystification and awe. Pussy he was fond of—also of poor Nicky, his son and heir, and of dear old Nani Lopez. According to her lights she was an upright, good creature; but Blanche, figuratively, set his teeth on edge, and even the sleek and

fawning Monty, filled him with a sense of unchristian repulsion.

When he surveyed Blanche and Dom, as they leant across the table bawling at one another, Paul Chandos breathed an inward prayer, that in a future state his relations would neither recognise nor claim him. He had a secret—those little dark-brown pills, which a trusty native apothecary prepared. The secret was called “opium!” he took it in order to dream, and to banish misery and care; and the gracious alchemy of the drug transmuted his poor surroundings like an enchanter’s wand. Once more he was at home in England.

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To Mrs. Chandos, her new daughter had proved an agreeable surprise. She was quiet, subdued even, and had exhibited, so far, no airs. The girl had a simple way of doing things, and the grace and composure of a great lady; this endowment would prove invaluable to her family, and was bound to open the doors of cantonment society. Rosa Chandos had her secret. She loved money—she hungered for it, as a ravenous animal craves for food—and money came in ample supply; yet her appetite was never appeased. She was that truly despicable character—a money-lender to the poor, sheltering her personality behind the broad proportions of her agent, Abdul Buk, who found in his employer the true daughter of the horse leech, and of Lopez, the soucar. No one suspected Mrs. Chandos; her business—which was enormous—was termed, “the love of figures” and collecting rents. She was a capital accountant, and had a marvellous head for a certain class of finance. The wretched woman was torn by two conflicting passions, both inborn and hereditary; these were the love of money, and the love of display—fellow inmates of her mind, and yet inveterate foes.

To Pussy, Verona represented a revelation, and she was figuratively on her knees before her sweet, English sister. And pretty Pussy, too, had her secret—there was a certain young Alonzo Diaz on the railway, to whom she had given her tender heart. Each time she went into Rajahpore pretty Pussy adorned herself with gaudy ribbons, and with anxious care, in the fond hope of meeting Alonzo; and she always carried a packet of

"conversation" lozenges in her pocket, in order (should opportunity offer, and her mother's attention be diverted) to squeeze one into his hot, limp hand. 'Oh, Pussy! who would have thought it of you? Artful little Pussy! And what of the girl curled up luxuriously on a long cane chair, with cushions heaped behind her, and her eyes half closed?

Dominga—the Lal Billi, or Red Cat—was a power in her own family—a power which stood behind the throne ever since she had been a passionate infant, a delicate child, and a precocious little girl, in a long pigtail. Her mother adored her, and denied her nothing. Before she had cut her second teeth, Dominga knew exactly what she wanted—and secured it; and when at the age of twelve years (having mastered the knowledge of many curious things), she had clamoured to be sent like Pussy to a hill school, there to complete her education, her wish was immediately gratified.

Mark the difference between the sisters! Good-natured, giggling Pussy had left the establishment with a very small mental equipment. She could write a love-note—with many ill-spelt adjectives, lavishly underscored; she could dance, crochet, do her hair, and make delicious cocoa-nut toffee; but she was as ignorant in her way as any Pahareen (hill woman), toiling under her load of baggage up the Ghât. But Pussy left behind her, as she went down, not a few devoted friends and many weeping eyes. Dominga, when it came to her turn to depart, not one; but she carried away a supply of information sufficient to flavour her conversation, and enable her to pose as "well informed." She wrote a fine hand, and worked hard at her singing, and imbibed some knowledge of history. Not only could she fix the date of the battle of Hastings, but of the battles of Pavia, Malplaquet, and Bunker's Hill. She enjoyed reading realistic descriptions of the time of Nero, and the sack of Rome; the massacre of St. Bartholomew, and the Reign of Terror. Her taste leaned to horrors, and she would have gone miles at any time to witness (surreptitiously) an execution! Dominga had her secrets—one was a whole live ambition! she ardently desired to shake off Manora and all her family, and to go forth into the world, there to shine alone. Although amazingly talkative, she was extremely reserved as to her own plans; no one guessed at her aim—an aim

she never once permitted herself to lose sight of—its name was “emancipation.”

At sixteen years of age, her doting mother had summoned Dominga from school, and she was launched upon society at a railway ball (the same at which Monty had proposed for Blanche). Dom was a born flirt, extremely lively, and indeed so vivacious that she invariably created a sensation. She imagined that it was “smart” and “up-to-date” to be loud and noisy (an enemy at Naini Tal had told her this thing); consequently, she ruined her best prospects by establishing a reputation for being rowdy, and bad form. She threw things at supper, and sat on the edge of a refreshment table, dangling her legs, screaming repartees, and making an uproarious clamour. Thus she brought herself into immediate notice and ill-repute. But shrewd Dominga had long discovered that this pose was a calamitous mistake—a false step she could never repair. She had actually gone out of her way to destroy her own social chances. Then she was frightfully handicapped by the Jones family—not merely by Blanche and Monty, but by his horde of connections, and she was compelled to foregather with the party when her mother was unable to accompany her—and they were such a crew! Oh, if she could only get a fresh start now! This girl Verona was so quiet and ladylike—she had such an air of dignity, she was sure to be taken up by the cantonment. Doors, at which she had figuratively waited and whined in vain, would be thrown wide, and she was determined to enter them by clinging to her sister’s skirts.

Dominga had a second secret—a declared, and not impossible, lover—in a certain Mr. Charles Young, a subaltern in the Miffineers; he was a merry, round-faced boy, known to his friends as “Baby Charles,” and he humbly worshipped the Red Chandos. To tell the truth, they were privately engaged. The fact was never suspected, for it was a well-established tradition that no one took “D. C.” seriously. She had been flaring about Rajahpore for five years, and was all very well to flirt or dance with, but to bring into a regiment—no, thank you! At a whisper of the news the commanding officer would have bundled Baby Charles out of the place—to a hill depôt—a garrison class—anywhere, rather than submit one of his subalterns to the claws of the Lal Billi. The pair had been engaged for six happy weeks; they posted notes to one another in “Mrs. Beeton’s Household

Management"—a volume in the Club Library—and they sat together holding tender conversation on the Club roof, which was flat and unfrequented—few ever ascended there—whilst Mrs. Chandos waited, and wondered, in the family victoria. She was not in the secret, and fondly believed her fair daughter to be detained in the reading-room.

Although Dominga was not in love, she was satisfied with her prospects. Charlie was young, and poor, and rather stupid, but he was an English officer—his father was an old retired General. If nothing better offered, she intended to marry him, and thus make her escape from Manora—shaking its dust for ever from off her feet.

Once married and presented to the regiment as Mrs. Charles Vavasour-Young, she resolved to enact the rôle of officer's wife, to the best of her ability. She was young, she was lively, she was—unless all men were liars—handsome. She could sing and dance like a professional, and would have a glorious time and go far. Meanwhile, Blanche, in her dingy little bungalow, and Lizzie Trotter, and Ada Diaz would die of sheer envy and jealousy—this reflection afforded Dom a species of intoxicating rapture. It was surprising that Dom had never been in love, although her flirtations were notorious and countless; and she could have married Tom Trotter, Alonzo Diaz, and a stout Eurasian doctor (Edinburgh M.B.); also, she would have married, had he been willing, Brian Salwey, but she had made up her mind that, unless she could "better herself," she was determined to compel her mother to give her money and her countenance, and to try her fortune on the Calcutta stage.

Dom's lithe, seemingly boneless figure had been supreme in skirt dancing at the school; her dancing had a charm, which her singing lacked. She represented the very poetry of motion, and seemed to drift before the eye like some exquisite summer cloud.

There was a good deal of the Chandos blood in Dominga—unhappily she had inherited some of the characteristics of her cousin Sydney, and, like him, she was secretive and false. She was also endowed with his brains, his irresistible will, his wheedling tongue, and his red hair. To her mother's side she was indebted for her indolence and love of soft luxurious ease.

Not a trustworthy or attractive character—is it? and yet some would declare, if they saw the graceful Red Cat, coiled up on her corner of the verandah, the indictment to be a libel, and that Dom was nothing more than a vivacious, shallow, impulsive creature.

Truly she was a curious mixture, this slim Eurasian, with the patrician profile—and the dark marks in her filbert nails. Her mind was as restless as the ocean, her body was indolent and self-indulgent—which of the two would rule her life? Which god would Dominga follow—ease or ambition; for ambition often carried luxury in her train.

CHAPTER XXII

THREE weeks elapsed before Verona was convalescent, and during that time, she saw but little of Dominga and her mother; indeed, the attitude of the latter with respect to an invalid was invariably one of suppressed hostility. Sickness in the house was a visitation that Mrs. Chandos could not tolerate, and the patient was sensible that she was guilty of giving a great deal of trouble, and was more or less in disgrace.

She and her mother never drew nearer. It was a painful fact, but they seemed to be cut off from one another by some impassable barrier of the spirit. On the other hand, Verona and her grandmother were drawn closer together day by day.

"I do love you, Verona," announced Mrs. Lopez as she stroked her hair; "you are so quiet and so sweet-tempered; you remind me of my poor Lily. Dominga is not a bit like you; she is always dragging your mother to the station and the club. Your mother is busy trying to mix in society, but it is foolish—she gets no further, though she thinks she does; people only smile and whisper. For all her trouble she will soon find that 'by running in the boat you do not come to land.'"

Verona made no reply; she knew nothing whatever of the station or her mother's position in Rajahpore.

"Mrs. Lepell and my daughter are awfully sweet to one another," pursued the old lady; "but it is a rat and cat friendship! Mrs. Lepell will not have us; she would rather have the Cavalhos; and as for your mother's liking for Mrs. Lepell, she waters the creeper but cuts the roots! She wants Dominga to make a grand marriage; Dominga, too, is willing; your father, he meddles not in these things."

"No," assented Verona.

"She tried to drag him to visit once or twice, but it was no use. Now and then she cannot move him. There are things he will *not* do."

There was silence for some time, while Mrs. Lopez fed and fondled a delicate buff chicken she was nursing in her lap. Then she said suddenly:

"Verona, why did you leave England? Why did you come here?"

"Because," replied Verona, and her pale lip quivered, "I wanted so much to see my own mother."

Mrs. Lopez gave vent to her queer, wheezy laugh.

"Then you were wrong to come," she declared. "It is as if one had put their head in the oil press and cried: 'The favour of Vishnu, be on me.'"

"I don't understand you, Nani. What do you mean?"

"It is always dark under the lamp."

"But still *I* am in the dark," she murmured.

"Well then, lovey, you are a stupid girl! you will guess my meaning when I say an English proverb: 'Put not your head in the lion's mouth.' You have heard that, surely?"

"Yes, but where is the lion, Nani?"

"My child, may you never find out!" and with this somewhat solemn aspiration Mrs. Lopez left the room in order to restore her other invalid to its mother. It must not be supposed that Verona was entirely neglected by her family—for such was far from being the case. Her father daily came and gazed at her through the door, and brought a few flowers. Pussy was demonstratively affectionate, and remained with her sister as long as her grandmother would tolerate. Mrs. Lepell sent dainty little dishes and picture papers; otherwise, as far as the outer world was concerned, the arrival of "the new Miss Chandos" appeared to have been almost forgotten, and when Dom and Blanche mixed in the little local gaieties and were asked about Verona, they invariably replied that "she was arl-right!"

One day Mrs. Lepell paid a visit, and had an interview with the invalid mother. "She wants a change," declared the benevolent lady. "Miss Verona, will you come over and spend a week or two at my house?"

"Thank you," faltered Verona; "you are very kind," and she looked interrogatively at her parent.

"Oh no, no," she rejoined, with energy; "I could not think of it. Mrs. Lepell, I cannot have one girl more favoured than another; you recollect when Dominga was ill you never invited her—and you have known her almost since she was a baby. If I allow Verona to visit you, 'and she a stranger,' Dominga would be so awfully hurt; she has such a feeling heart, and she is so fond of *you*."

"Well, I suppose she will not object if I take her sister for a drive?" said Mrs. Lepell, rather sharply.

To this project Mrs. Chandos accorded an unwilling assent, and presently the Trotters were greatly edified by

beholding poor whitefaced Verona stagger out to Mrs. Lepell's luxurious victoria, Pussy following her with pillows and propping her up with care.

It was a lovely soft evening, and Mrs. Lepell allowed the girl time to enjoy her surroundings before she commenced to talk. She glanced at her as she lay back among the cushions; what a fine, high-bred face it was! although so wan and languorous.

"About here the country is all very flat," she began, "cane and millet crops, millet crops and cane! Now and then you notice one enormous solitary tree, the last of the forest perhaps. See that one yonder—more than a mile away; I've often thought I would like to make a nearer acquaintance, but he stands encompassed by wheat. Every time I drive out I look at him and bow, for we have been friends for twenty years. There, on the left, you may notice the city in the distance—beyond the city the spire of the cantonment; but we will go for a drive into the country, and you will like that best."

Verona nodded her head as Mrs. Lepell's black Australian steppers flew along a flat, red road bordered with high cane crops and acacia trees. Now and then, they passed a cluster of huts or a drove of goats, and once they met a tall, two-storied cage on wheels, drawn by a camel, full of chattering travellers.

"The mail-cart to Beemapore!" announced Mrs. Lepell, with a laugh. Then—"you are better, are you not, my dear?"

"I am afraid I am," she answered, half under her breath.

"My dear you must not talk like that," said Mrs. Lepell, laying her hand on hers. "Fever does not leave one a wreck; I know exactly how you feel."

"I hope you have never known how I feel," exclaimed the girl, turning two tragic eyes slowly on her companion. "I feel—oh, *why* didn't I die?" and she burst into tears.

"I am so sorry for you, you poor dear child." Mrs. Lepell took her hand tightly in her own; "I know it is all so very new and strange."

"And it can never be otherwise," sobbed Verona. "I have come out too late ever to be one of them. It were really better if I were dead."

"My dear, don't say such things!"

"Not to every one, Mrs. Lepell, but you have been so kind to me, and you look sympathetic. It is a relief to

me to say aloud what my brain keeps repeating all day and sometimes all night, 'I wish I were dead.'"

"Why?"

"Because I have no real home, here or anywhere; I am an outsider—an intruder—and oh! I was so anxious to come! My grandmother is right when she says I am like the dhoby's donkey, for I belong neither to the house nor the river."

How nearly she belonged to the river! Did she remember? Mrs. Lepell wondered.

"And there are other things."

"Yes; but now listen to me, Verona—of course I shall call you Verona; there *are* other things. You are only twenty-two, with all your best years before you; you have been well educated; you have enjoyed all the advantages of wealth and mixed in the world; you have the use of your faculties; you have a certain amount of brains and beauty. All these other things you actually possess. It is the act of a coward to throw down her arms when she meets with a reverse, and cry, 'I want to die! I am tired of life.' And life is so interesting, even to me, Verona, who am old enough to be your mother. I wish to live, and see it all—and what will happen."

"Ah, but," she protested, "you are different—so different."

"My dear, every one has their own row to hoe; how do you know that Providence has not sent you to brighten your home, and refine—and raise your surroundings."

Verona gave a sort of gasping, hysterical laugh.

"I grant you that your mother and Dominga may not be altogether sympathetic, but you would have immense influence with Pussy and Nicky; she is indolent sweet-tempered, easily led; and Nicky is extremely clever, but only half educated, poor boy! they took him away from the Martinière school, and he has loafed about ever since. Brian Salwey declares that he has a capital head-piece; all he wants is some one at home to urge him on, to set to making his way in the world. But he is losing his best days slacking about Manora, playing tennis and making hencoops. Now you should take him—and Pussy in hand."

"I? how do you mean? What can I do?"

"Do? Why, teach them! Give them a couple of hours English and French lessons of a morning. I can lend you

some books. Let them do English and French dictation, and reading: Green's 'History of the English People' and Macaulay's 'Essays' will keep them going. I'm sure Pussy will be all the better for a little arithmetic and spelling. You'll find that it will interest you—and employ them."

Verona made no reply.

"Then there is your father, dear; have you thought of him?"

"Yes, he scarcely ever opens his lips to me or any one; he appears to accept everything as it is, and to be sunk in a sort of lethargy."

"Oh, my dear child, if you only knew his life as my husband related it to me, you would be sorry, and make allowances for his silence. He has been a scapegoat for others: he has remained out here for twenty-eight years, and fallen away from the memory of all his old friends. You call him lethargic? Well, I daresay his feelings are benumbed. Early in life he received a terrible shock, which has stunned him. Once he was one of the cheeriest young fellows; what a contrast to his present condition! He just grinds away at his post like a horse in a mill, in order to support his family. You and he should be especial friends."

"Yes—but why?"

"Because, presumably you are a Chandos; you know England—his native country; the others do not. There is one bond. You like books and perhaps chess—so does he; you might easily bring some light and warmth into the poor man's grey life. Will you try, dear?"

"Yes; but I don't think it will be of the smallest use!"

"It will! In occupation you will soon forget yourself."

"I hope I may—for I hate myself at present."

"You hate everything just now, because you are in low spirits and weak health. Adopt my prescription—it will cure you. You and I might have some long drives and talks together, but I am aware that I may not enjoy your company too often."

The two ladies returned to the big bungalow, where they sat in the verandah and had tea. It was like an English tea, with all its dainty little appointments. The sight of a pretty drawing-room, with its books and flowers and sketches acted as a restorative. So all Indian drawing-rooms were not dingy and dark and squalid! Mrs.

Lepell's society was a veritable tonic, and when she had deposited the invalid at the door of her home, the girl felt miraculously stimulated and revived.

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Verona lost no time in putting Mrs. Lepell's advice into practice—her project of being governess to Nicky and Pussy was accepted by the pair with unexpected pride and gratitude. A large table in one corner of the verandah was carefully screened off, and here they worked for two or three hours every morning, in spite of the jeers and derision of Dominga and her mother. Pussy was incredibly dull; nothing could induce her to put the "e" in the right place in "believe" and "receive," and as to the difference between latitude and longitude she merely laughed and shook her head.

On the other hand, Nicky had brains, and a decided taste for mathematics. Salwey gave him lessons twice a week, for Nicky had been promised a clerkship in the works if he proved steady and industrious; certainly, it was only fifty rupees a month, but it was better than nothing. His ambition had been set alight, and Salwey had fired him with the desire to be an engineer, and to endeavour to pass into Roorki College. Nicky now turned his carpentering talents to mending an old, long-neglected boat, and of an afternoon he rowed his two sisters about the river—even his grandmother ventured once—anything to please Nicky, for Nicky was her darling. Verona, to her great satisfaction, now began to know her father a little better; he dropped his reserve, and seemed faintly interested in the boating and lessons.

One evening, much to her surprise, he invited her into his own particular den; it was at the far end of the bungalow, opened directly into the verandah, and was entered by three steps. As she stood and gazed about her Verona gave an exclamation of astonishment; she had seen an officer's barrack room in England, she was standing in its counterpart here. There was the brass-bound chest of drawers, the camp bed, the folding chair and round table; over the mantelpiece hung a sabre, sabre-tasche, and spurs; on the walls, covered with numbers of fading regimental groups, were also polo sticks, hog spears and some old sporting prints. One side of the room was lined with a

book-case; there was a writing table, a shabby, comfortable-looking armchair, and quantities of pipes. It was the room of an officer and a gentleman!

"Here I sit and smoke and dream alone," explained Mr. Chandos.

"Always alone?" enquired Verona.

"Yes; no one else cares to dream and read."

"I think I do, father."

"Then I invite you here; consider yourself an honorary member of the Den."

"Thank you."

"Do you play picquet or chess?"

"Yes—but not well."

"No doubt you will beat me—I am terribly rusty."

"At any rate I shall try," she answered with a bright smile. "Who?" suddenly walking over to a picture, "is this handsome young man in racing colours?"

"Do you not know?" he asked with an air of distressed surprise.

"You!" she exclaimed, with an unflattering start.

"Yes; that was taken after I won the Civil Service Cup, at Lucknow, on 'Good Fortune.' Names go by contraries, for since that day my luck turned. I have been going steadily down the ladder ever since."

"Oh, father," and she paused and turned and looked at him; "why do you say so? What do you mean?"

"I've done those things which I ought not to have done, and not done those things which I ought to have done, and there's no health in me."

She gazed into his eyes, laden with inexpressible remorse; then turned away to hide her own tears—and presently said, in a totally different voice:

"Ah, I see," pointing to the bookcase, "you have all Sir Walter Scott, tattered and torn—how I love him!"

"Is he your only love so far?"

"Well," with an effort of gaiety, "I must confess I am very fond of Charles Lamb and Emerson and George Eliot."

"So am I," cried her parent; "I see that we shall agree."

"Above all I love William Thackeray."

"Here," he laughed and said, "you have my consent; it is a family failing."

"Oh, what a beautiful old place!" she exclaimed,

as she paused before a little spotted landscape, in the midst of which stood a stately and picturesque mansion.

"Yes, Charne Hall; I was born there."

She moved in order to examine it still closer, thinking of the appalling contrast between her father's birthplace and his present abode.

"It has been in our family since the reign of James I.; my cousin has it now. He married a woman of large fortune; they have no children."

Verona turned and glanced at him. Her thoughts flew to Nicky. Was Nicky the heir to this ancestral English home?

"It is a beautiful place," continued her father, gazing at the picture with eyes of deep affection; "it is the sort of mansion house agents cry up, with its saloon, suite of drawing-rooms, picture gallery, library, and forty or fifty bedrooms; but if it was only a little roadside cottage I should love it just as much. I am proud of being a Chandos of Charne. In all the ups and downs of my life I have remembered this fact, and kept the name spotless, to the best of my power. You can never guess, my dear, what sacrifice this has cost me, miserable and insignificant as I am. I have upheld our name. Were any one belonging to me to dishonour or disgrace it, it would kill me." He spoke with such vehemence and suppressed passion, that he seemed transformed.

"Here," he continued as he unlocked a drawer, and produced a large photograph, which showed the place on a much finer scale. "And here," he added, placing another picture in her hand. It was a photograph of a pretty girl in her teens, the face was sweet, the dress old-fashioned, "Oh no, not that," hastily seizing it. "But this—it is your grandfather." It was a photograph, from a portrait, of a handsome, haughty, elderly man.

And across one corner of the picture was inscribed in a bold hand: "Chandos, of Charne."

Verona took the picture in her hand and considered it attentively.

Her grandfather! What a contrast was presented by this aristocratic English magnate to her grandmother in the Dufta!

"I have never shown it before," resumed her father in a tremulous tone, "so do not say anything about it. But you have been at home—you are a Chandos—you understand. I think, my dear," and his voice broke a

little, "we shall have many things in common. I am thankful that you came; already you have done good to Nicky and Pussy and me." He paused abruptly and stood in a listening attitude.

Yes, there was a sound of wheels! the victoria had returned from its daily round and common task.

Presently a shrill voice came pealing down the verandah.

"Verona, Verona! Now where *is* that girl?"

"There, there my dear, you had better go," urged her father nervously; "you will come again soon." As she turned to leave the room she met her mother face to face in the doorway.

"Oh, ho!" she cried, "so *you* have found your way here? I have seen Mrs. Lepell; she says she wants you and Pussy to go to tea to-morrow. I can't think what she is up to!"

CHAPTER XXIII

It was an unprecedented honour for Pussy to be invited to tea at the big bungalow, and when Verona had arranged her hair, and dressed her in a white skirt and pink silk blouse, she looked surprisingly handsome. Indeed, when Mrs. Lepell shook hands with her, and noticed the look of timid self-approval on her pretty dark face, she began to realise Mrs. Chandos in her youth. She had invited the girl as a screen and companion for her friend Verona, and the three sat out under the bamboo trees and had tea. Pussy felt excessively nervous, yet triumphant; never before had she been thus honoured—only invited as one of the factory crowd; she gazed about her admiringly at the cane chairs and rugs and books. While her sister and her hostess conversed, she munched cakes and chocolates—stared at them steadily and mentally compared the two. Verona was quite as much a great lady as Mrs. Lepell, her eyes were so queenly; she sat with such ease, with her pretty hands in her lap, and even in a plain cambric gown she seemed beautifully dressed. Here was Mr. Salwey riding up on his splendid black horse—how fine he looked! She surveyed him furtively as he came quickly down the steps, in his neat brown riding boots, his light coat, his tie and his hat. What blue, blue eyes he had! How quiet they were, and yet they seemed to see everything with their cool, watchful glance!

He was almost the only gentleman of Pussy's acquaintance; he was Pussy's idea of a story-book hero; everyone of her favourites fitted with him, but he was better, and handsomer, and cleverer than them all. She looked up to Salwey as her ideal—but had bestowed her heart on his antipodes.

"Well, Aunt Liz," he said, coming forward with a smile.

"Oh, Brian, I am glad to see you! I thought you were on duty."

"No, I'm on pleasure," and he nodded to Pussy with a friendly air.

"This is my nephew—Brian Salwey," said Mrs. Lepell.

"Brian, let me introduce you to Miss Verona Chandos."

Verona inclined her head; he bowed profoundly and, as he moved aside some papers, and took a chair, Brian

Salwey was inwardly telling himself that this young person was no half-caste; she looked like a lady of high degree, with her delicate features and well set-on head.

"And here," resumed his aunt, turning to the shy-dark girl, with eyes like fixed stars, "is Miss Pussy, with whom you are already acquainted."

"Oh, yes; Miss Pussy has often been down to my place with her brother—and seen my ponies."

"Oh, they are lovelee! such beauties! Oh, I do love ponies," she exclaimed, then wriggled, and relapsed into a condition of smothered giggling. What a curious contrast was afforded by the English and the Indian sisters! One seemed a refined, cultivated girl of the world—the other, a daughter of the bazaars! Could education achieve so much with respect to deportment and voice?

Presently Salwey expressed a hope that "there was some tea left for him? Being as you know," turning to his aunt, "a thoroughly domesticated character."

"And pray, how did you leave England?" he inquired, now addressing himself directly to Verona.

"I left it with some regret," she answered, with a smile. "It was August you know."

"Ah, August is my favourite month," he remarked, as he carefully selected a lump of sugar.

"Yes, you imposter!" said his Aunt. "You would like Miss Chandos to suppose that you are thinking of gorgeous sunsets, and harvest homes, and early autumn tints. My dear, the truth is, he is thinking of the shooting."

"Well, I have not been able to do anything but *think* of it for some years. Pray, who is the owner of this pretty thing?" he asked, as he stooped to pick up a little gold pencil-case.

Verona held out her hand. "Yes, is it not pretty? I got it at the Army and Navy Stores."

"Oh, the Stores! They are painfully associated in my mind with wedding presents—I have put in some bad quarters-of-an-hour there."

"Yes, it's a ready-money place," suggested his aunt with a sly smile.

"Oh, that was not it—thanks awfully for the insinuation—it was the worry of thinking, and making up my mind."

"Why give anything?"

"What can I do, when fellows I know will get married?"

"Console yourself with the expectation of the crop *you* may reap some day."

"That depends! If I were to marry an heiress—I dare say I'd have a good harvest, on the principle of 'give an apple where there is an orchard'—you see," glancing at Verona, "that I can quote proverbs, as well as Mrs. Lepell."

"But she is not a cynic like you, Brian."

"Come don't crush me in public, Aunt Liz. I hear"—turning to Verona—"that you have brought out no end of new books——"

"Yes, I have a good many; can I lend you some?"

"If you lend him a book, Verona, you will be sorry," interposed his aunt.

"Now—she is impeaching my honesty, you see! Any cheap paper-backed edition—not turning solely on murder and robbery—would be gratefully appreciated."

"I daresay I can supply your requirements."

"The fact is," said Salwey, taking off his hat and throwing it on the grass. "I cannot stand anything that demands sternly concentrated attention. I don't want to hear of the 'over-man,' nor even the 'sub-conscious brain'; on the other hand, I find the reading of 'shockers' requires an amount of physical courage, in which I am deficient—and—for love stories—I have—to borrow the American terms, 'no use.'"

"So, you see, he will not be easy to suit!" supplemented Mrs. Lepell.

"Oh, yes," he protested. "He is merely a simple, unsophisticated police wallah."

"Not so *very* simple, Brian. And you *have* some use for love stories. Do you recollect how you borrowed and gobbled up 'A Princess of Thule,' and sent it back horribly disfigured and reeking of tobacco?"

"I offered to replace it——"

"To keep it—as I understood——"

"For my part, I much prefer 'Macleod of Dare,'" declared Verona.

This remark at once started an animated discussion.

And now that the conversation circled round books and pictures, poor Pussy was completely out of her depth, and could contribute nothing beyond the language of the eye, and spasmodic giggles.

Meanwhile, as Brian Salwey talked to her charming, low-voiced sister, he felt figuratively swept off his feet;

it was impossible to realise that this girl was the daughter of the sub-manager and "Mother Chan."; and her great-grandmother had been a Temple girl from the West coast, who had sung and danced before the gods. His brain actually reeled as he endeavoured to assimilate this fact, with the beautiful face, the well-cut, firm lips, that were imparting her impression of the recent Passion play at Oberammergau. Never for a moment did she appear to recall that terrible scene by the river, and her own pitiful cry, "Let me die! Oh, let me die!"

At present she was laughing at some epitaphs that Mrs. Lepell had unearthed from an American magazine, little dreaming how near she had been to earning an epitaph herself!

"I must say I like the unquestioning conviction of this one from Wyoming county," said Mrs. Lepell, and she read aloud:

"She was in health at 11.30 a.m.
And left for heaven at 2.30 p.m."

Brian leant nearer, and looked over his aunt's shoulder, and said: "Yes, but I think this one from Maine would be hard to beat as a monument of punctuation.

'John Philips

Accidentally shot as a mark of affection by his brother.'

or this is most excellent:

'Here lies the body of Obadiah Wilkinson and Ruth his wife,
Their warfare is accomplished.'

"Now let us hand the book to Miss Chandos that she may make her selection." As he spoke he took it from Mrs. Lepell, and held it to Verona. After a slight pause, she said: "I really think mine is the best of all."

"Then I challenge you to let us hear it," said Salwey. In a low steady voice she at once began to read aloud:

"Our life is but a winter's day,
Some breakfast and away,
Others to dinner stay—and are well fed,
The oldest sups and goes to bed.
Large is the debt who lingers out the day,
Who goes the soonest—has the least to pay.'"

"So you would go soon?" looking at the girl interrogatively.

"Yes, after breakfast, so to speak," she responded.

"And I would remain till after supper—when the band had dispersed, and the lights were put out."

"I, too, should like to remain till the Last Post," said Mrs. Lepell.

Pussy listened to this conversation with a face of blank bewilderment. What did they mean by talking of breakfast and supper in this fashion?

"By-the-way, Verona," said Mrs. Lepell, "to change to another subject, have you ever had any trace of your jewels?"

"No never."

"Pray, Brian," turning to her nephew, "what are you about? I repeat the common cry, 'Where are the police?'"

"The police were never informed of this theft," he rejoined. "I heard of the robbery as a mere bazaar shave."

"Do you mean to tell me" said his aunt, now sitting erect, "that you were not officially informed that Mrs. Chandos had a press broken into, and that Verona's dressing-bag was opened, and all the valuables in it were carried off?"

"What valuables?" he asked, judicially.

"Oh, oh—oh!" cried Pussy, unable to hold her tongue any longer. "Oh, such lovelee things, that must have cost lakhs of rupees! A gold watch and chain, a diamond and turquoise necklet, pearl bangles, and a pendant with an emerald as big as *this*"—making a circle with two little brown fingers—"and rings, and all sorts of things."

"How long ago did this happen?"

"Six weeks."

"And this is the first I have heard of it; I am afraid everything is scattered far by this time."

"I did suggest sending for the police," said Verona.

"Yes, it was when you were so sick; mother would not have it; she," and here Pussy giggled, "says all the police are thieves."

"Even so, I wonder she did not endeavour to set a thief to catch a thief," rejoined Salwey, "and I maintain that the police are not thieves. Has nothing been done?" turning to Verona, "Why has the affair been allowed to drop?"

"I really don't know," she replied.

"And has there not been a single trace?" pursued Mrs. Lepell. "You know that man, Abdul Buk?"

Salwey's eyes brightened.

"Yes, I have that—experience."

"I was walking on the road the other day when he drove by in that battered old phaeton of his; when he saw me he pulled up, and said: 'Oh, what a pity about your pretty things, Miss Sahib, I am so sorry. I think the watch and chain might be got, if you would give reward—say, of three hundred rupees.'"

"Yes?" said Salwey.

"I refused; I told him I had no money to spare."

"No," put in Pussy, "for she has spent it all on my bicycle."

Verona coloured vividly, and Salwey said: "If you will write me out a list of all the things that have been stolen, I should like to see what I can do, on the principle of 'Better late than never.'"

"I will—thank you very much," the clock was now striking six, and Verona rose to depart. She had enjoyed an hour of what had once been her everyday life, a woman's brilliant, cultivated talk, and dainty refined surroundings, a man's astonished first look—and subsequent subdued homage. Oh, she knew it all so well! For one short hour she had been back at Cannes, with the sun setting over the Estorells. The sun here had just set behind the sugar factory, where her father was employed; she was nothing more or less than a foolish discontented half-caste, who had momentarily forgotten her place in the world, and must at once return home or her mother would be angry.

Salwey accompanied Verona and Pussy, carrying magazines and papers, the gift of his aunt; almost before he left them he must have heard an irritable:

"Now, where have you two been? Oh, my! you are late. And look at Pussy in a pink blouse! How set up she is!"

All this harangue was from Dominga—who was lolling in the verandah in a long cane chair.

She and her mother had lately returned from Rajahpore, bringing with them a considerable amount of irritation and ill-temper.

When Salwey once more made his way to the tea-table, his aunt was still there.

"Now, Brian," she said, "sit down here; I want to know what you think of her."

"Her?" he repeated, "which her?"

"Don't be so ridiculous! You know perfectly well who I mean."

"I think," he said, "that the new Miss Chandos is the most beautiful girl I have ever seen."

"And has no recollection, that this is not your first meeting, and that but for you her body would have been found in the Jurra?"

"I don't know how to believe that she is the sister of that fat little dark girl, or the daughter of the Mother Chan, or even the sister of the illustrious Dominga."

"Their noses are rather alike," said Mrs. Lepell, with a meditative air; "do you see much of Dominga?"

"Much too much! She and her mother are continually in the club, ostensibly to read the papers; the girl plays tennis and badminton—she also plays the fool."

"You don't like her, Brian?"

"Well, no, I know a few things about Miss Dominga Chandos."

"Oh, tell me?" said his aunt, eagerly.

"Her people ought to look after her."

"And is that all I am to hear?"

"Isn't it enough? Think of all the events, situations, and mysteries, your imagination can weave out of that little sentence. To me she is always the Cat—the Red Cat; she has a disagreeable way of winding herself about, and purring."

"Singing, you mean?"

"I don't admire her caterwauling; her voice is detestable. I always seem to hear the native note dominating her song, the Nautch girl note."

"And so you say that Dominga reminds you of a red cat? Take care she does not scratch you some day."

"No fear!" Then, as if suddenly recollecting something, "What an extraordinary business this is about Miss Verona's jewels; I cannot understand it."

"Neither can I."

"To me it looks rather like a hushed-up affair; someone in Manora has had a hand in the robbery."

"Perhaps," said Mrs. Lepell, doubtfully, "but Mrs. Chandos is the last woman in the world to allow herself, or her family, to be robbed without a struggle."

"Yes, that old scoundrel, Abdul Buk, seems to know something about it."

"I always thought he was rather a nice, venerable old person."

"He is a nice, deep old person, and I must admit that I've never yet found him out; he is full of palavar and civility. If I were to believe anonymous letters——"

"But no one believes them," protested his aunt.

"He is at the bottom of the worst form of usury and blood-sucking in the district.

"There you go," said his aunt, "started on your hobby, usury and money-lenders."

"Well, they are the curse of the country, and if it is in my power to abate that curse, and release a few hundred slaves, I shall not have lived in vain."

"Brian, you ought to have been a barrister; I can see and hear you haranguing a jury."

"Thank you, I'm perfectly satisfied with my present profession, hunting down and securing criminals for barristers to denounce and juries to condemn."

There was a long silence; Mrs. Lepell put a few stitches in her work, and Salwey made some notes in a little book.

"District Superintendent Salwey," she began suddenly, "of what are you thinking?"

"Aunt Liz, this question of yours has become a confirmed habit, as regular as 'how do you do?' Since you particularly wish to know—I am thinking of the new Miss Chandos and her turquoise necklet; why is she kept so strictly in the background?"

"Perhaps her mother imagines that she would extinguish Dominga—and Dominga is her idol, her brazen image."

"Possibly, and the other is a true lady, unaffected, refined, and altogether a most attractive and interesting personality."

"But nothing to *you*, Brian. You must not fall in love with her; think of Mrs. Lopez as you see her, basking in the sun, a shapeless old woman, a mass of superstition and ignorance; think of Verona's grandmother, and then think of your own. You know the beautiful picture in the Roxley library—I believe if you were to marry a Eurasian girl, she would come down out of her frame!"

CHAPTER XXIV

"GIRLS, I have ordered the waggonette for this afternoon," announced Mrs. Chandos, "so we will all go to the club. Verona, you have been here two months, and never once been in to the station. Just fancy!"

Verona's attempted apologies and excuses were imperiously silenced. In a quarter of an hour she found herself driving from the door, in company with her mother, Dominga, Pussy and Blanche, who had been spending the morning with her relations.

"Oh, Verona, how I wish you knew some of the officers' wives," bewailed her mother; "it would be such a help to your poor sisters. You see, although we are such a good family at home, and go back for hundreds of years, yet we are looked down on in Rajahpore as just factory nobodies. Your father will never leave a card on the mess, no, not even when his old friends were here, though I went down on my knees and asked him to do it. Yes, I did! No one calls on us except one or two young men who are no good. No?"

"But don't you go to numbers of entertainments and tennis parties?" enquired the newcomer.

"We go only to look on—to sports and cricket matches, but we know no one, for we, of course, will not sit beside the Trotters and the wood contract people. Then, when we go to the station club, people give us the cold shoulder, and look as much as to say, 'Now, what are *you* doing here?' If you only knew one or two officers' wives they would ask us to balls and dinners, and what a thing it would be for us! There must be hundreds and thousands of people in the world that you know, Verona."

"Yes! but I do not think that I shall meet any of them at Rajahpore."

During this conversation the party had been driving towards the cantonment, which at this period of the year resembled green, park-like plains, diversified with barracks, bungalows, clumps of feathery bamboos, and clumsy mango trees.

Outside the club waited many carriages, and round the tennis courts a number of people were assembled, as Mrs. Chandos and her daughters descended (unassisted) from the wagonette.

They chattered into the reading-room, *en masse*, and and went over to the big table where the picture papers were to be found. These they tossed about recklessly, or turned over with contemptuous indifference. No one took the smallest notice of them, although Blanche, Dominga and Pussy had duly announced their arrival by loud remarks and laughter, as ear-piercing as a peacock's scream.

Mrs. Chandos was apparently buried in the *Queen*, but her little black eyes were all the time roving round the room; yet she did not appear to observe the glances of annoyance that were cast at her three merry daughters. Verona, more sensitive, got up and walked away into the adjoining library, which was lined with books. Several people were also examining the shelves. As she was turning over the pages of an old friend, she was startled to hear a voice beside her say: "Is it possible that I behold Miss Chandos?" She looked up quickly, and beheld a little blonde lady, with a pert, piquant face, and in an instant recognised Miss Snoad, a second-rate girl, who lived near the Melvilles, and whom she suddenly remembered had, to the surprise and delight of her family, married an officer and gone to India.

"Ah! I know you're going to say 'Miss Snoad,'" she continued, and her little green eyes danced gleefully, "but I am Mrs. Barwell now; my husband is a Major in the Muffineers. Who would have thought of seeing *you* out here? I suppose you are globe-trotting. How is Madame de Godez?"

These questions were poured forth so rapidly that Verona had no time to reply.

"Madame de Godez is dead; she died very suddenly last March."

"Oh!" ejaculated Mrs. Barwell. Undoubtedly Madame de Godez's heiress stood before her, the happy owner of fifteen thousand a year! "And only fancy your being at Rajahpore; I suppose you have a smart chaperon—some lady of title. You must both come and stay with me—a good long visit."

"Thank you very much, but I am with my own relations," replied Verona.

"Why—I never knew you had any relations in India."

"Nor did I, until within the last few months."

"Who are they?" asked the lady breathlessly. "What is their name?"

"Chandos; they live at Manora."

"What! *Those* people?" and Mrs. Barwell's voice grew shrill, her face became quite pink, as she collapsed on a chair and exclaimed:

"Well, I never!"

Verona remained standing, motionless, gazing at her in dead silence, and there was a long, uncomfortable pause.

"And what has become of all the money?" gasped Mrs. Barwell at last.

"It went to Madame de Godez's next of kin."

"My gracious goodness! my stars! What a change for you; what an *awful* come down!"

At this moment Mrs. Chandos bustled into the library, closely attended by Pussy and Dominga.

"Whatt!" she exclaimed triumphantly, "so you *have* found a friend, Verona!" and she looked from her daughter to the little hard-faced woman in the arm-chair. "You must introduce me, Verona. No?"

Verona, painfully embarrassed, remained silent. What was she to do? Of course her mother wished to know Mrs. Barwell, but Mrs. Barwell did not wish to know her mother.

To her profound relief the latter stood up, and said:

"Oh, how do you do, Mrs. Chandos? I believe I get my eggs and fowl from you? Your daughter and I were acquainted in England."

"Yes, yes, yes; and this is my other daughter, Dominga. I daresay you have met Dom at the tennis——"

Mrs. Barwell merely closed her eyes at Dominga, and turning abruptly to Verona, said:

"Now, when will you come to see me?"

"I really cannot say."

"Oh, you can have the victoria any day," volunteered her mother with gushing officiousness.

"Let me see," said Mrs. Barwell, "Wednesday is the polo; suppose you come to tea and we go on there afterwards. There is a grand match, and a number of people are coming over from Cheepore."

Mrs. Chandos once more put herself forward, and with eager volubility promised her daughter's company without fail, and after a few little speeches Mrs. Barwell left the library.

"Whatt luck!" cried Mrs. Chandos. "Dominga, you can *not* play tennis; you must come down with me to the bazaar and get a pair of shoes. Whatt luck! Whatt luck!" she kept repeating. "Whatt luck!"

Verona failed to see any connection between the word "luck" and Dominga's new kid shoes, but she understood this puzzle later.

When Wednesday came, Verona—who was exceedingly reluctant to fulfil her engagement to Mrs. Barwell—was astonished to find that Dominga was to bear her company! Dominga, arrayed in her own best green foulard and one of "Suzanne's" celebrated hats, was dragging on a pair of new white gloves as she entered the drawing-room.

"Where are you going, Dominga?" she asked.

"I am going with you—a pleasant surprise!"

"But, Dom, you cannot come; you know you were not invited."

"Oh, yes, I can. Tea is nothing—she will not mind."

"Then I shall not go at all," announced Verona, and as she spoke she began to remove her hat. "I will write a note of excuse. Please tell the man to take round the victoria."

Mrs. Chandos was barely in time to hear the fag end of this conversation, and burst out in a fury of passion.

"Hi! hi! what do you mean giving those grand lady orders here? I only give orders in this house. You learn thatt, Miss. I now order you, take your sister to Mrs. Barwell's. If you were not a bad hearted, mean, thankless wretch, you would feel glad and proud to introduce Dominga to your friends. She shall go—and I say it!"

"Then she goes alone; and, indeed, I am not at all anxious to resume my acquaintance with Mrs. Barwell."

"Oh, it is already three o'clock," screamed Mrs. Chandos; "you will be late! What is the good of you—you idle, useless doll, but to help your sisters into society?" Mrs. Chandos was perfectly livid with passion; her tongue, now loosened, gave vent to a torrent of abuse.

At this particular moment Verona caught sight of her father timidly opening the door of his den, and, turning her back on her storming mother, she hurried to appeal to him.

"Father," she began, "I am invited to tea in Rajahpore with a lady I once knew slightly; I have no desire to know her any better. My mother accepted the invitation, and now insists on sending Dominga with me. I'm

sure Mrs. Barwell will think it a great intrusion. What am I to do?"

"Go, my dear," was his surprising reply; "go; you must submit to your mother. There is no alternative."

"Go?" she repeated incredulously. "You are not in earnest!"

"Yes," and his voice faltered, poor, craven man. "Go for my sake, Verona—and the sake of peace. These scenes"—and he nodded towards the verandah—"are distracting. Oh, go, my dear, for God's sake—it will only be a little hurt to your pride, and it will soon be over!" and with this extremely faint consolation, Verona, holding her head very high, went down the steps and took her place in the victoria beside her exultant sister.

CHAPTER XXV

AS Verona bowed along the road beside Dominga, she felt brave enough to cope with this unprecedented occasion. When she thought of her father's miserable eyes, and agonised appeal, she was prepared to face a dozen Mrs. Barwells, but by-and-bye, her courage subsided; the cold fit came on, her heart beat fast, her limbs trembled involuntarily. She was aware that for the first time in her life she was about to take an unwarrantable liberty. They had all too soon reached their journey's end; dashed up a gravelled avenue, and come to a full stop under the porch of Major Barwell's bungalow. Presently they were ushered into the presence of the lady of the house, who was lolling in an armchair, reading a paper. She rose with alacrity to greet her visitor, but when she caught sight of "Red Chandos" behind her pretty pale sister, her agreeable smile instantly changed to an expression of angry astonishment.

"I have ventured to bring Dominga," said Verona, rather faintly.

"So it seems," rejoined Mrs. Barwell, with an almost imperceptible inclination of the head.

"A most unexpected honour"—the words were "unexpected honour," but tone was "unpardonable impertinence."

Mrs. Barwell raised her voice and called, "Qui Hye." A servant came running in.

"If any other ladies call—say I am not at home."

Verona thoroughly understood. Mrs. Barwell did not wish her friends to find Dominga Chandos sitting in her drawing-room, and she made up her mind that as soon as possible the lady should be relieved of her society—nothing would induce her to remain to tea.

"Oh, stop a moment," said Mrs. Barwell. "Now that I think of it, the private theatrical people are coming in—never mind, never mind." With a wave of her hand she dismissed the bearer.

Then she sat down and motioned the sisters to two chairs, and addressing her conversation exclusively to Verona, began:

"I was so surprised to see you the other day; I had no idea you were in the neighbourhood. What an awful change you must find it in every way!"

Verona mentally assented to this remark, but merely replied :

"I like India. I have always wished to see it."

"That is fortunate, is it not, my dear? as your home happens to be out here. What a contrast to Halstead! Do you often hear from the Melvilles?"

"Not very often—I am a bad correspondent."

Those letters, were Verona's constant difficulty, she could not tell the truth—also, she could not tell falsehoods. She loved Mrs. Melville even more than ever, but she dared not acquaint her with her unfortunate condition. There is loyalty to one's kindred—be they who they may—rich or poor, black or white. Her letters home were consequently constrained, after the first mention of her relatives she rarely named them. Mrs. Melville could read between the lines. The child was disillusioned and depressed.

"What funny people they were," resumed Mrs. Barwell.

Verona's friends had never struck her as particularly humorous. Possibly Mrs. Barwell thought them "funny," because they had never cultivated her acquaintance in former days, when she was Miss Snoad.

"By-the-way, what a wretched match Margery made!"

"Oh, no!" protested her friend, "she is extremely happy."

"But he had scarcely a penny besides his pay, and that girl had the advantage of the very best county society. What is the good of county society, and being exclusive, if you can't do better than that? Of course, she was no beauty; indeed, for my part, I always thought her very plain."

During the conversation Dominga sat aloof, totally unabashed by her icy reception, and stared round the room exhaustively. It resembled its mistress—it was cheap and showy, not dark and gloomy, with heavy hangings and solid furniture, like the drawing-room at Manora, but light and gay. The walls were coloured bright green, and covered with large fans and small mirrors; quantities of wickerwork chairs were dressed in gaudy flounced cretonne.

Over the floor were scattered numbers of deerskins, mounted on red flannel. Whilst her sister and Mrs. Barwell talked of home, Dominga presently rose from her seat, strolled around examining the photographs and ornaments, as calmly and critically as if they were so

many lots at auction. Meanwhile Mrs. Barwell followed her movements with angry eyes. Just at this moment two ladies were ushered in, Mrs. Palgrave and Miss Richards, the Colonel's wife with her sister. Mrs. Palgrave was tall and slight; her face was rather plain, but animated, and she had a charming smile. Her sister was a handsome bright-looking girl of about five-and-twenty. They were both remarkably well dressed, and appeared to be in the highest spirits. Mrs. Barwell received them effusively, but did not attempt to present the other ladies. Her slight civility to Verona had now become congealed.

"So you have just come from the rehearsal?" she began, making room for Mrs. Palgrave beside her.

"Yes, we are quite worn out with our exertions, at least, Dolly is. I am merely chaperon, critic, peacemaker, and promoter."

"How are you getting on?" turning to Miss Richards.

"Only pretty well. Mrs. Norton and Mrs. Long have been squabbling, and Captain Prescott has thrown up his part. He won't act; I cannot imagine why he is so cross."

"But I know," said Mrs. Palgrave, with a laugh. "It is his liver. Whenever he has a touch of liver, he always becomes argumentative and cynical, and says no woman under forty is worth speaking to."

"Poor fellow!" exclaimed Mrs. Barwell, "then there is not one to suit him here—we are all too juvenile."

"Like Baby Charles, such a dear boy, who is acting with me," said Miss Richards. "He is so young, and so pleased with everything—hockey, cricket, racquets; he really should have a child's part."

"And what *is* his part?" asked Mrs. Barwell.

"Oh, he is my *fiancé*, but he can't make love a bit—although he is *in* love."

"Pray, how do you know, Dolly?" demanded her sister, and her tone was authoritative.

"Well, he wears a very badly knitted green tie, a shocking affair! I have remonstrated with him about it, and told him I will not be engaged to him unless he leaves it off; it entirely spoils his appearance, but he still clings to his green tie, and blushes when I chaff him, and looks quite hurt. I am perfectly convinced that *she* made it. Does anyone know," laughing and looking round the room, "a young lady in this neighbourhood who knits ties?"

Verona glanced instinctively at her sister and their eyes met. Dominga had been keenly interested in the conversation, and there was a tinge of colour in her cheeks which added to her appearance; she looked brilliantly handsome. Verona, aloof and ignored, had felt the irony of Mrs. Barwell's insolence eating her very soul—and now rose to depart."

"What," cried her hostess, "why are you going away? you know—I *asked* you to tea."

"Thank you very much, but we really cannot stay." She glanced imploringly at Dominga, who nevertheless remained rooted to her chair, and returned her sister's look with a stare of bold defiance. No, no! she would not stir. Seeing this *impasse*, Mrs. Barwell turned to Verona, and said:

"I cannot let you run away like this—here is tea—do sit down, and don't be silly. I am sure you have no *other* engagement!"

In the meanwhile Miss Richards was talking to Dominga, and conversation now became general. Presently Dominga drew Miss Richards' attention to a photograph of her hostess, over which she went into audible raptures. Now Mrs. Barwell was not insensible to flattery, she liked to inhale it in strong doses. She was pleased to hear Dominga comparing her photograph to Mary Anderson—the comparison being considerably to her advantage.

After all, "Red Chandos" was not a bad sort of girl; she was really beautifully dressed, undoubtedly handsome, and, if the men were to be believed, "great fun." She accorded one or two words to her visitor, and the favourable impression was deepened.

"Oh, Mrs. Barwell," said Dominga, "I did so want to see your pretty room." Here was a half apology. "I'd heard so much about it—and it really is perfectly charming; I hope you don't mind my saying so."

Mrs. Barwell did not mind at all, but coldly appropriated the compliment as her due, and Dominga—who would always be very useful in any house but her own—stood up, and began to help her with the tea things.

"Mr. Salwey is stage manager, is he not?" said Mrs. Barwell.

"Yes, and such a capital one," replied Mrs. Palgrave, as she helped herself to cake; "immovable, implacable, a sort of armour-plated man, whom nothing can ruffle! I

wish you could have seen him to-day, when those two women were talking hard to one another about a certain scene, neither listening to one single word the other said. Mr. Salwey stood by, gently throwing in occasional blocks of solid sense."

"Had it any effect?"

"Oh, yes, ultimately. I like Mr. Salwey; I always think it is such a pity that he is not in the Service!"

"I am sure he thoroughly agrees with you," sneered Mrs. Barwell.

"And why is he not in the Army?"

"Well, it is all owing to his stepmother," explained Mrs. Palgrave. "George knows his father, Colonel Salwey, such a smart dapper old beau. He came in for a very nice property after he left the Army; his wife died, leaving this one boy, to whom he was apparently devoted."

"Was—yes?"

"But at some foreign watering-place he came across a pretty little fluffy-haired, plaintive widow, who beguiled him into marrying her, and completely metamorphosed the old gentleman. Brian Salwey failed for his first examination at Sandhurst; then he quarrelled with his odious stepmother, so got no second chance. She bundled him out of his father's house, out of the country, and into the Indian police; for she did not want a great big step-son hanging about at home."

"Oh, here they all come," exclaimed Mrs. Barwell, as five men followed one another into the room.

The first to enter was Colonel Palgrave, a tall, handsome, soldierly man, a little bald, with a hearty, cheery voice; Major Barwell, a short, formal-looking gentleman, with a skin like a winter apple—considerably older than his wife; Captain Prescott, a dark young man, in polo kit, with a sallow complexion; Charles Young, a handsome boy—though two-and-twenty, he looked about nineteen—bubbling over with good humour, vitality, and *joie de vivre*. Last, not least, Brian Salwey.

These men soon dispersed themselves about the room, each seeking the lady of his choice (they were all apparently acquainted with Dominga Chandos—and perhaps a little surprised to find her in the present company; when Charlie's merry eyes fell on her, he blushed up to his ears), and presently the talk grew loud and brisk, concerning "shop" and theatricals, theatricals and "shop."

"I do think it is such a shame," said Mrs. Barwell, during a pause in the general buzz, "that my husband won't allow *me* to act," and she looked at him coquettishly. "It is really too bad of you, Bingham, to have such strict old-fashioned ideas. I know"—addressing the company—"you all have such fun at the rehearsals."

"I don't know what *you* call fun," remarked Captain Prescott, with an aggrieved air. "It's worse than being at school again. I had to mug up my part with a wet towel round my head. I worked myself up to a tremendous pitch for a great love scene, and was told for my pains that my voice sounded for all the world like a dog, whining outside a door!—so naturally I chucked."

"Oh, I assure you, it's not all beer and skittles, Mrs. Barwell," supplemented Charles Young, who was half sitting on a table. "What *do* you think. They want me to cut off my moustache!"

At this there was a roar of laughter, his moustache being represented by a very faint outline of delicate down.

"Well, now, I suppose we ought to go on to polo," said Colonel Palgrave, putting down his tea-cup, "perhaps we shall lose something good."

Mrs. Barwell immediately agreed, hurried into her bedroom, and returned in a second, in a flowery hat, and the party sallied forth on foot. Verona found herself walking beside Mrs. Palgrave; she had a good face and a charmingly sympathetic manner. Verona had heard that the wife of the commanding officer was a most popular lady, and Blanche's tale, that she and the major's wife did not speak, was obviously a fable.

Mrs. Palgrave, although but eight-and-thirty years of age, was a deputy parent to all "the boys." She listened to their troubles, and had them to dine on Sundays; she nursed them when they were ill; she wrote to their mothers, and generally kept her eye on them. She was, moreover, a treasure to her husband; managed all the sewing clubs and mothers' meetings, visited hospitals, had never made the slightest effort to marry her sister in the regiment, and was generally respected and beloved.

"I've not seen you before," she remarked to Verona. (But she had heard of her.) "And now you have found your way into the station, I hope some day you will come and spend an afternoon with me."

"Thank you very much," was the girl's non-committal answer.

She did not wish to mix in station society.

"I think it is very likely that we have some mutual friends."

"Perhaps we have."

"Do you act at all?"

"No, I prefer to be one of the audience."

"Then you will come in and see these theatricals, won't you?"

"By-the-way, Lucy," interrupted Colonel Palgrave, hurrying up to join them, "I forgot to tell you that young Fielder has arrived; I daresay he will be at the polo—I'll bring him up and present him to you."

"Another boy?" she asked, with a smile.

"Well, not exactly, I should say he is six or seven-and-twenty; you know he comes to us from the Guards, with the reputation of a lady-killer."

"The Guards," she repeated. "Really!"

"I fancy he has been going ahead a bit, and his father, Lord Highstreet, has sent him out to India to us."

(Verona lagged behind—surely this intimate sort of conversation was not intended for her ears.)

"I see," assented Mrs. Palgrave, "as a sort of punishment. What a compliment to the regiment!"

"Well, the exchange has been effected merely with the idea of getting him into another set."

"You have seen him, of course."

"Oh, yes, and he has no resemblance to one's preconceived idea of a naughty boy—perfectly self-possessed, cheery, and rather good-looking."

"Perhaps he may be an acquisition, after all."

By this time they were at the polo ground. Mrs. Palgrave waited a moment for Verona, and said:

"My husband has been telling me about a new officer who has just joined, a Captain Fielder. We have some chairs and rugs near the tent—won't you come and sit by me?"

A large and motley native crowd were assembled on the edge of the ground, their brilliant red and yellow garments giving a touch of colour to the scene, and the game was already in full swing. As Verona accepted Mrs. Palgrave's invitation, she noticed that Dominga and Mr. Young appeared to have a great deal to say to one another; unquestionably they had not met for the first time to-day.

On the contrary, as we know, Charlie Young and Miss Dominga were fast friends—little Charlie was constantly chaffed about his infatuation for “Red Chandos,” and bore jokes and jibes with a good temper that discouraged and, at the same time, disarmed his tormentors.

“I say, I shan’t tell you how surprised and delighted I was to find you at Mrs. Barwell’s,” he murmured, as he walked beside his enchantress.

“Oh, my sister met her at home,” rejoined Dom, in her most off-hand manner; “that is why we were asked to tea. Verona knows hundreds of swells. Do tell me what you think? Do you call her pretty?”

“Oh, yes, uncommonly good-looking, but rather sad—a bit down on her luck, I should say.”

“People seem to think she will cut out everyone in Rajahpore.”

“Except you. No fear of that, darling.”

“Hush, Charlie, you really *must* be careful——”

“Well, tell me about your sister. Where has she been all this time?”

“At home—living among all the grandees, and so rich—and having such a good time. But her friend died, and her money went to others—such an awful shame. She used to know Princes, and Dukes, and Lords.”

“Oh! then I’m afraid we can’t do much for her in that line out here. Our nearest approach is the only son of a lord, who joined the regiment three days ago.”

“Oh, my! really. Who is he? Do tell me about him, Charlie, dear.”

“Well, his name is Fielder—the Honourable James Fitzalan Egbert Fielder, son and heir of Lord Highstreet, late of the Guards.”

“Why has he come out to India?”

“I believe—this is strictly between you and me—he was sent out by his father because he got into some mess with a lady—he is a great lady’s man. He wanted to marry a tremendously frisky widow, years older than himself. And so his people shoved him out here, to get him out of harm’s way. That’s the story. Of course, it may be a lie.”

“What is he like?”

“Oh, not much to look at—sleek, well-groomed, drawling sort. A cool hand, I should imagine; says he is awfully keen on seeing active service. I don’t fancy he is up to much of a rough campaign—more of a fine fellow

strolling down Piccadilly. However, he has taken to us kindly, and professed himself delighted to join the regiment. Not like that chap who, when he was asked what the new corps was, said, 'I don't know, but you go from Waterloo—and they have green facings!'"

"His family are old, I suppose?" enquired Dominga, to whom this anecdote was the purest Greek.

"Old—oh, lord, yes! I expect they paddled over with the Conqueror."

"We are an old family, too," announced Miss Dominga, turning her head slowly from side to side. "Though father never talks—he is in the Landed Gentry book—you can see it at the Club—and we are the Chandos of Charne."

Little Mr. Young, much as he adored his companion, could scarcely restrain a smile, to hear a Chandos of Manora boasting in this fashion. Her people were terrible. No, he never attempted to defend them. Her quarrelling, pushing, half-caste mother, her dusky brother and sister, her father—the old broken officer, who, it was said, took opium.

But his Dominga stood apart from these. She shone like a star against a dark sky. Some day he would marry her—not her family. Yes, the infatuated youth, aged twenty-two, with one hundred pounds a year and his pay, had determined to make Dominga his wife. Their engagement was to be kept secret until the regiment moved to another station—the Colonel would cut up rusty if he heard of it, and hustle him off to the depot in England; he objected to married subalterns. The Honourable Jimmy was despatched to India because he wanted to marry someone at home—and it would be odd if he was packed off home because he intended to marry a girl in India.

Whilst he was pondering over this idea, his fair lady love, who strolled beside him, was occupied with other thoughts. She was unusually silent, and when she did speak, her answers were somewhat brief and distrait.

At the present moment her glance was alert with excitable watchfulness, and her mind was filled with eager speculations respecting the newcomer. Had luck at last thrown fortune in her way? Was this young future lord her fate? Her fate, come to seek her in this out-of-the-way corner of the world! Her face looked vivid and her eyes dilated as she recalled her grandmother's prediction, that

"Dominga would wear jewels, and stand in a great light." And what of Baby Charles?

By this time they had arrived at the polo ground, where a place near the tent was reserved exclusively for the party. Captain Prescott rode up to them proudly on his new polo pony, a recent investment.

"Hullo, Prescott," cried Charlie Young; "where did you rise the animal? Did you get him out of the Zoo?"

"Yes," he rejoined, with the utmost gravity; "don't you remember him when you were in the monkey-house?"

Dominga received this sally with a peal of laughter—this sort of wit appealed to her at once.

And Verona now saw Dominga in the society of men for the first time. She appeared to be enjoying herself prodigiously, and was what may be called "a quarrelsome flirt." Tossing her head, she said to one:

"Oh, Mr. Cox, I am not going to speak to you! Please pass on. You never came for that set of tennis. No! no! no!" and she turned her back on him with considerable dramatic effect. "Yes—and here is Captain Hibbert, just as bad! You wicked, faithless man, how can you look me in the face! Where is the novel that you promised me? You have fallen in my esteem to the bottom of the ladder."

"But won't you allow me to crawl up again?" he implored, with his hands in the attitude of prayer.

"No, certainly not; go away—do!"

By-and-bye most of the men drifted away to play polo, and Major Gale captured "Baby" Charles, who departed with pitiable reluctance. And now Dominga and Mrs. Barwell fell into conversation, which, as time went on, became more intimate and more animated. Dominga's purrings and flatteries tickled the little lady's vanity and softened her heart; she discovered that Dominga Chandos was not "half bad," but a really agreeable girl, with plenty to say for herself, and full of news (such delicious little spiteful stories). Dominga had learned the fact that you may be risky—but never dull. Before they parted, Mrs. Barwell had invited her delighted acquaintance to come in and spend a long day with her soon. Oh, triumph! Oh, goal attained! Oh, success!

All at once Major Palgrave reappeared out of the crowd near the tent, accompanied by a young man wearing the colours of a well-known cricket club. He had quick, red-brown eyes, sleek brown hair, a pale, impassive face, and

a well-knit figure. He was presented to Mrs. Palgrave and her sister—to Mrs. Barwell and to Mrs. Tully. The stranger was completely at his ease, charmed to make their acquaintance, and somehow managed to convey the singular impression that he was an old resident—and that they had but just arrived.

On the whole, the general opinion of Captain Fielder was highly favourable. "Oh, yes, he was already fascinated with what he had seen of Rajahpore and India. He was sure it was a capital country for sport, and," he added, with a peculiar slow smile, "amusement."

When such topics as his journey, the dust, and a few items of home news had been exhausted, his roving gaze distinguished the two sisters to whom he had not been presented. He surveyed Verona calmly. Handsome? Yes, but down in the mouth, and not his style. Then his glance passed quickly to Dominga; their eyes met, and his opened suddenly with a bold eager stare. Oh, there was the girl for his money! What hair! What colouring! What a spice of the devil in that vivid face.

Dominga certainly looked her best. She wore green, which was ever becoming. Her figure was graceful, there was a brilliant colour in her face, born of excitement; yes, she was undeniably striking and attractive. Moreover, it was the first time that this poor Dominga had ever beheld anyone connected with the aristocracy, and her feelings were a mixture of admiration and awe. "The Honourable," as she mentally called him, appeared at the first glance to be somewhat similar to other men, but her imagination lost no time in investing the newcomer with an air of distinction, and every quality which is generally considered necessary to the equipment of a perfect hero of romance. He approached and muttered something to Charlie Young, and Dom received a delightful and unexpected shock when she understood that Captain Fielder desired to be presented to her. He had singled her out from all the other girls! This was indeed the proudest moment in the life of Dominga Chandos! She coloured charmingly, her eyes sparkled, her face broke into smiles—for an instant her beauty was transcendent! Ungrateful Dominga gradually ignored, and soon entirely forgot, poor little Charlie, and presently abandoned him in order to go and sit on a distant bench with Captain the Hon. James Fielder, the new arrival, just then so very much in the public eye; and Dominga took care that they placed

themselves where the public eye could behold them without unnecessary inconvenience.

Verona noticed at a distance Mrs. Trotter and her two unattractive daughters. As they appeared to be rather "out of it," and forlorn, she walked over and spoke to them. Mrs. Trotter accorded Verona a civil welcome, and as usual conversed chiefly about home.

"Oh, ho! it is very plain to see that *you* have been in England!" she remarked, as she glanced over at Dominga, who was now too lofty to notice the Trotters, and had cut them dead. "It is plain that you know what's what; you have some manners—not like that 'Crannie' girl, Dominga."

Fortunately, at this point, Mr. Salwey came up and joined the group, and the topic was changed. The Trotter family were visibly gratified by his attention; but after a little conversation he carried off Miss Chandos, and invited her to walk round the outside of the polo ground and see the ponies.

CHAPTER XXVI

IN the meantime Dominga and Captain Fielder lounged on a bench—conspicuously aloof from the crowd. A somewhat constrained silence had fallen between them; he was wondering if this handsome girl, with talking eyes and vivid expression, was “good fun”? She was meditating as to whether she might treat him as just a common, everyday officer, or not? Dom had finally made up her mind—as she looked up quickly and met his full, bold stare, a stare so prolonged and searching that another girl would have felt affronted and abashed; not so Dominga.

“Well?” she asked, raising her eyebrows interrogatively. “Now, tell me candidly, what do you think of them?”

“Er—think of what?” he stammered, obviously a little startled?”

“My eyes—what else?” said the girl, with disconcerting bravado.

“Oh—by Jove! they are splendid. Er—I was not quite sure of the colour a few minutes ago. I’d have sworn they were black; now I see they are greenish brown——”

“And in another five minutes they may be a greyish-blue—one thing I can promise, they are never red.”

“Do you never cry? Oh, come now! Every woman cries.”

“Pray, why should I cry?” she asked, with a touch of defiance.

“But you must have some sort of escape for your feelings?”

“Not necessarily. I have no feelings.”

“Then you are one of the sights of India! What more uncommon than a woman who has eyes like a chameleon, who never cries, and has no feelings? You are a marvel, Miss Chandos!”

“But I am not really Miss Chandos. I am only number four, and I am called Dominga.”

“Good heavens—what a name! Where *did* they find it?”

“In foreign parts. My grandfather—was Portuguese.”

“Have you no pet name—at home?”

“They call me ‘Dom’—when we are by ourselves.”

“Er—may I call you ‘Dom’—when we are by our-

selves?" As he spoke Captain Fielder hitched himself an inch nearer and assumed his most insinuating expression.

"The seat is intended for two," she remarked, giving him a little tap with her parasol. "If you want the whole of it, please say so. As to calling me 'Dom,'—we shall never be by ourselves again——"

"Pray why not? Don't you like me?" he asked pathetically.

"Because," ignoring the second question, "I am not in society."

"Then I am sorry for society. Why do you call yourself an outsider?"

"We are—only the sugar people!"

"Er-r, now I understand my sensations, the instant I saw you; you looked too sweet for words!"

"Don't be silly, and please don't run away with the idea that I am either soft or sweet. I leave that sort of thing to Pussy and Verona."

"Verona, is a town—Dominga, I *think*, is an island. Has your mother a craze for geography?"

"Verona's name is really Veronica."

"Why have you such—curious names?"

"Can't you guess?" she asked, looking at him out of the corner of her eyes.

Her companion shook his head in hopeless ignorance.

"Then I will tell you, and when you know us better you will see how well our names fit! We are called after two saints!"

Captain Fielder's broad grin and incredulous wink went a long way in advancing his intimacy with this lively companion.

"Now, tell me, why are you so down on yourself? It's a mistake—you should leave that sort of thing to other people—they do it so *much* better. You said you were not sweet, and that you have no feelings. I am sure you were wrong."

"No——"

"Er—well, I won't take your word for it; I mean to find out for myself."

"You will not have the opportunity. After to-day the station ladies—who are very jealous of me——"

"By Jove, I don't wonder at that!" he interpolated with decision.

"Will fence you in—with barbed wire!"

"Oh—will they?" with a derisive laugh. "It is not very easy to keep Jimmy Fielder in bounds! Ask papa?"

"See—they are all staring over here now," and she pointed with her parasol. "They are ready to tear my eyes out."

"I'll take care of your beautiful and matchless eyes. You just leave them to me."

"I can take pretty good care of myself, thank you. What do you think of Rajahpore, Captain Fielder?"

"I adore it already."

"What a ridiculous answer. Why?"

"Because it has made me acquainted with you."

"How can you be so silly?"

"I was born so. Tell me, how do *you* put in your time here?"

"Oh, I sing a good deal, I have a wonderful voice—and I bicycle, and—I read—and play tennis."

"Can you read—French?"

"Why, of course."

"Then I can lend you some ripping novels!"

"No, thank you," rather stiffly; assume a virtue if you have it not. Dom had once laboured through a few French exercises, and could no more read a page than ride a steeplechase.

But Jimmy was promptly taken in, and impressed.

"Proper, good little girl! Well, I must confess—some of them—are—a bit—strong."

"You would not lend them to your sisters, I presume?" adopting her well-known quarrelsome attitude, "though you offer them to *me*."

"Oh, I've no sisters, thank the Lord! As to offering the books—you might have jumped at them. I did not know what sort you were. You see, a fellow never can tell——"

"I see Verona looking this way. She is coming to fetch me——"

"Er—is she your keeper? Has she got you on the chain?"

"No; I should pity her if she had!"

"Then you and I are in sympathy—a pair of bold, independent spirits. When shall I see you again, Dom?"

"Perhaps to-morrow at the Club."

"Oh, so you come to the Club. Hurrah!"

"Yes, for books and tennis; but we are complete outsiders, as you will soon discover,"

"You will never be an outsider to me, Dom—already you have your place——"

"What do you mean?" she demanded. "What place?"

"Only the box seat in my heart."

"Heart!" she repeated with a scornful laugh. "No one talks of hearts in these days—except the heroes of stories in penny magazines."

As she spoke Dominga rose, and drew herself to her full height. She was two inches taller than Jimmy, who gazed at her in profound admiration. Yes; already he was caught and enthralled by her audacity and insolence, and entangled in the meshes of her splendid burnished hair.

"Dom," said Verona, as she joined her, "it is past six o'clock, and we must be going home."

"Very well," assented Dominga, "I am ready." But she did not attempt to make her sister and "Jimmy" known to one another. No, she would not share the captive of her bow and spear—that is to say, eye and tongue—she was determined to keep him exclusively to herself. (Dom knew what girls did, being a most daring and successful poacher!)

Jimmy stared at this Miss Chandos, who looked and spoke like a well-bred English lady, and yet was Dominga's own sister. What did it mean? Dom, with all her charm, spoke with a quaint, half-foreign accent, and her manners decidedly lacked the repose which stamped the caste of Vere de Vere, whilst Verona—the other girl, "the slow one," as he had already classed her, was Vere de Vere—and no mistake!

As Dominga crossed the polo ground attended by her new slave, she tossed her head and flounced her skirts, and glared at spectators as much as to say, "Don't you wish you were in my shoes?" When she stepped into the victoria she leant forward, and smiled with cruel exultation at the Watkins and the Trotters—they could not fail to have seen "the Honourable" tucking the dust cover over her knees. They knew that *she* had got into society at last!

As Dominga was driven homewards her body was unquestionably in the shabby victoria, but her mind was in the seventh heaven!

"He" had chosen her out from among all the women in the station. "He" had called her "Dom," and, at parting, had given her fingers a fierce, emphatic squeeze, from the effects of which they were still tingling!

CHAPTER XXVII

MRS. BARWELL, who had never previously had it in her power to patronise any one, now thoroughly enjoyed the novel experience. She issued continual "commands" to Verona and Dominga Chandos, and the latter waited on her constantly, and soon became an established favourite; her flatteries were so piquant and unfailing. But Verona disliked attending the "drawing rooms" of her former acquaintance and present patroness; she found ample occupation at the home, reading with Pussy and Nicky, rowing with them on the river, bicycling about the district, teaching her grandmother to knit, and reviving her father's old attachment to games. Now and then she spent a long evening in his room, playing piquet, or discussing books and places and people. Paul Chandos was a well-read man, a cultivated and delightful companion; strange that this cultivated, clear-headed gentleman should start and shrivel into silence when he heard the sound of his wife's quick footfall and rasping tongue! Undoubtedly he enjoyed these evening hours with Verona, but she had an instinct that these *tête-à-têtes* were not looked upon with favour by her mother; indeed, she had a secret, a dreadful conviction that her mother disliked her. In little indescribable ways, this fact was brought home to her a dozen times a day.

When Verona had recovered from the paralysing shock of her first sensations, and after her illness had crept back to life and good resolutions, she made a bold effort to win her mother's affections.

In every possible way she endeavoured to capture her approval. She worked in the garden, she mended and made, and darned and trimmed. She was prepared to accept cheerfully this life of renunciation and self-denial; but oh! how dark and dreary it would be without a little love. Her mother was devoted to Dominga; her eyes and voice seemed different when she spoke to her. Why should she not venture to ask for some crumbs; she, too, was her mother's daughter? Though not naturally demonstrative, she one day astonished and exasperated Mrs. Chandos by clinging to her with tears as she begged her "to spare her—though she came so late—a little of the affection she gave to the others; it would make her so happy."

Mrs. Chandos, when she had recovered from her surprise, stared critically at her daughter and exclaimed, "My, what a funny girl! Why, of course I love you!" and she accorded her a hasty kiss. "You get lots of love; your Nani is awfully fond of you—so is Pussy; so am I. No!"

But yet, in spite of this declaration, Verona felt that between her and her mother was fixed a gulf, which widened daily; indeed, she still had the dreadful, secret conviction that her mother actually disliked her. But why?

Sometimes, her father was ill—so said Mrs. Lopez; sometimes for three or four evenings his door would be shut fast, and the old lady would assure her, with a potent nod, that "Chandos was not for reading; he was *fatigued*, he was 'a little seek,' and wanted to be quiet," and once the girl overheard her mutter "Truly, it is easier to be rid of your shadow, than a bad habit."

Poor man! he was in the grip of the opium fiend, and lived in a delightful dream-country in his arm-chair, with drowsy eyes and folded, wasted hands. After one of these attacks, Verona noticed that his features were haggard, his eyes dull and blood-shot, his spirits most desperately depressed; also, that all tender enquiries and expressions of sympathy were somewhat curtly set aside.

It was now the very height of the cold season, Rajahpore was full, the cane crop was being cut, and every one seemed busy. One day Mrs. Lepell sent her protégée a little note, which said:

"MY DEAR VERONA,—

"Would you care to go over the factory? I am expecting a party this afternoon, and Tom has promised to show them round the works. Manora people are sick of them, but it will be a novelty to you. "E. L."

Verona accepted the invitation with pleasure, and when she arrived at the Big Bungalow there found assembled Major Gale, Major and Mrs. Barwell, Mr. Salwey and various strangers from Rajahpore. Mr. Lepell personally conducted the party round the yards; here he pointed out the great carts, laden with sugar cane, just brought in by buffaloes.

"Now, here you see it at the start," he said. "Later on, you shall see it in the sugar bowl."

Guided by him the visitors explored the entire factory—saw the mills grinding the cane, saw the black sugar in liquid form, the refining processes, the furnaces; last of all, the loaf sugar in blue paper caps, ready for departure. Then they inspected the distillery, and the gigantic casks of rum—intended for the use of the army. Mr. Lepell was an enthusiast, and harangued his guests eloquently—"Sugar" was his text—then he gave them a long object-lesson in machinery; finally, they climbed up a winding, spiral staircase, and stood on the flat roof of the factory, and surveyed the whole country—a dead level, with nothing to break the monotony but an occasional village or mango tope.

"Oh, what a sea of cultivation and crops!" exclaimed Verona.

"Yes," assented Mr. Lepell; "India is agriculture, agriculture is India. All round you see the cane; it is a good year. The chief industry here, of course, is sugar. There are scores of private mills."

"What are they like?" some one asked.

"Oh, primitive affairs—a rude wheel, an ox driven round and round to crush the cane; then there is a hole in the floor, and a furnace to boil the stuff into goor, or treacle."

"I suppose the people are very well off," said Verona, turning to Mr. Salwey.

"They ought to be," he replied; "the cultivators pay about fifteen rupees an acre for cane, which in a good season produces two or three hundred rupees' worth of juice; but they are all in debt to the money-lenders."

"How is that?"

"Well, you see they have no savings or capital; they live hand to mouth. For a marriage, a birth or a funeral, they must spend largely; it is a tradition handed down for centuries; they borrow money on the coming crop, say two hundred rupees—that is fifteen pounds. For this the money-lender takes as interest, one anna per rupee per month, which is seventy per cent.; it runs up like the celebrated nail in the horse's shoe! The unfortunate ryot soon finds that the interest has trebled the original debt; in a short time the account will show that all the money due from his harvest does not half cover the first advance! and still the interest on the debt rolls on month after month. The cultivator who once pawns his crop never gets out of the money-lender's power, but the money-lender allows

him enough grain to keep the wretched man alive—who, sooner than be turned from his paternal home, becomes his bond slave for life."

"Is it not dreadful?" Verona exclaimed.

"Yes; the usurer makes enormous profits, and allows the other just what keeps soul and body together. He is careful not to kill the goose who lays the golden eggs—his manner is always most kindly and sympathetic! The old story of burying money in a pot is dying out; usury has taken its place. Most of the money paid down in that office," and he nodded to the building below, "goes to them."

"Can it not be prevented in some way, Mr. Salwey?"

"I'm always trying to stop it, but with little success; there are men in the city, living at their ease, and piling up thousands, while these"—pointing to the broad expanse of cane land and the swarms of workers below—"toil."

"Usury is the ancient custom of the country," she remarked.

"So was once suttee. It is the curse of India."

"Do you know any of the money-lenders?"

"Yes; some of the native bankers are fair and square. It is the private ones, who are the fiends. They have neither fear nor pity. They charge daily interest, they count their victims by hundreds—their slaves; for generations they toil always for the money-lender; children succeed to the family debts, which go from father to son; they represent valuable live asset to the sowcar, who fattens on their earnings! His only fear or risk is the cholera, which sweeps away whole villages, and then there is none left to pay! Many of these poor creatures do not know what it is to have two meals a day. I could not have believed, had I not seen it for myself, how abject is their poverty." Here he smothered a sigh.

"What a hopeless state of affairs!" exclaimed the girl.

"Yes; and they are content with so little. If a man has enough to eat, a roof to cover him, a little tobacco for himself and some pewter bangles for his wife, he asks no more."

"He could not well ask for less!"

"I declare I feel in a blazing rage when I think of his misery and toil, and the wealth and indolence of those who are literally devouring his life. Now, observe the

people coming in with carts of cane and barrels of juice; they are almost like skeletons, or is it my imagination? There, you see, two of them are quarrelling about something—possibly a copper coin, worth half a farthing. They often quarrel; it is one of the most quarrelsome circles in India."

"What do they quarrel about?" she asked.

"I can tell you," said Mr. Lepell, who was listening, "generally land. In other countries people are attached to their ancestral acres; in India it is a mania."

"Have they never any amusements?" inquired Mrs. Barwell, who had approached.

"Yes; those who are pretty well off excel in wrestling matches; they have quail and cock-fighting, and they are all fond of cards and gambling and kite flying," said Mr. Lepell, "and now shall we go down to tea?"

Salwey and Verona still lingered on the roof; she was taking a last long look at the scene, the winding river, the cane crop, the little villages, the distant city. In the golden rays of a gorgeous sunset India looked both rich and prosperous.

"Well, what do you think of it?" inquired Salwey.

"I like it," she answered; "it is my native country; there is something mysterious and fascinating about it. Even before I knew that I was born out here, I yearned to come to India."

"In short, you heard the East calling."

"Yes," she replied, "and now I hear Mr. Lepell calling, and we must go."

Brian Salwey lived in a bungalow overhanging the river, and close to the cantonments (he was honorary member of the mess). The rooms were small and bare, but the stables were ample, and handsomely furnished. Twice a week, in the cold weather, did Nicky Chandos row down the river to do an hour's mathematics with his model and hero. Salwey had always been sorry for the boy, and felt drawn to him; for with all his Eastern lounging ways, his stiff brown hair and sallow skin, Nicky had brains, had ambition and the inherited instincts of an English gentleman. Yes, Salwey had encouraged the visits of young Chandos; he told him long yarns about his own school-days, he lent him books, he lectured him, he taught him how to row a boat—indeed he taught him many things

as they sat together in the shabby little sitting room that overlooked the shining river. Salwey now began to realise that he took an additional interest in Nicky, and looked forward with peculiar pleasure to his visits and his talk. What, he asked himself honestly, did it mean?

The answer was simple as A B C.

It meant that Nicky had an attractive sister; to sum it all up in one word, it meant "Verona." He caught his thoughts recalling her pale, delicate beauty, her slow, reluctant smile, her air of detached, unstudied repose. Evidently the newcomer was working wonders up the river; she was wheeling Pussy into line; he noticed a distinctly improvement in Nicky's manners, which had previously left much to be desired. He talked of good sets of tennis, and bicycling, rowing and reading aloud. Home was such a jolly place since Verona had come! There was no nonsense about her, and even Nani Lopez said she was "a jewel."

But what was this "jewel" to him? Was he going to make a fool of himself and fall in love with this beautiful, unfortunate Eurasian? What a mother-in-law!

What a grandmother-in-law—as his Aunt Liz had reminded him. And yet, why should he not think of Verona Chandos? His life was lonely; he had no ties; his father had married a detestable little adventuress, and had allowed her to thrust herself between them.

(Colonel Salwey was a timidly good man, and ventured to write to his son once a year—at Christmas.)

Why should he not make his home in India? Do as he would, he could not get the girl out of his head; she haunted him as he sat in his verandah, or as he rode about the district, looking after his work. "She is a half-caste," whispered a warning voice; "look at her sister Blanche."

On the other hand, old Mother Lopez was a truly good woman, tender-hearted, simple and charitable. Little Mrs. Cavalho was in her way an uncanonised saint. If the truth were really known and boldly proclaimed, there was a certain amount of Eastern blood to be found in English society! Many unconscious individuals were Eurasians, counting back to the pagoda tree days of their grandfathers, and the spacious times of Old John Company. If one must judge by appearances, Verona Chandos might very easily be taken for the daughter of a hundred earls, and, at any rate on her father's side, her race was undeniable.

Here came Nicky, rowing himself down the Manora, eager to enjoy a promised lesson in practical chemistry, for Salwey dabbled in photography and chemistry, and between his dark room and his amateur laboratory, the vapours, sounds and explosions, one or two of his myrmidons were under the impression that he kept an evil spirit on the premises!

A white bull terrier, called "Chum," the most intelligent and attached of dumb friends, when he saw Inky Chandos toiling up the steep garden from the boat, lashed his long whip tail, where he sat in the verandah, and greeted him with an all but human grin of welcome. "Chum" was a dear dog, and a courteous gentleman; the whole cantonment loved "Chum." But he only loved his master—and Inky Chandos.

CHAPTER XXVIII

It was the second week in January, the date of the Rajahpore race-meeting, the one notable local event in the year. Every bungalow in the station had several tents pitched in its compound for the accommodation of guests; the Rest House was crammed; strange faces were to be seen at the Club, and strings of unfamiliar ponies were being exercised on the course. The great day dawned at last; it was, of course, brilliantly fine, and the oldest resident was heard to declare that events on the cards, the class of entries, and the number of visitors, had never been approached. Such a fête was naturally a proper occasion for Mrs. Chandos to make ostentatious appearance in a wagonette with two horses; and the wagonette, which resembled a gay parterre, contained the lady herself, Dominga, Pussy, Blanche, Monty, Nicky, on the box, and last, but not least, Verona, who would gladly have been excused, but was compelled to come forth in her best remaining dress and a pretty white hat—which fortunately had not happened to have been becoming to Dominga.

Mrs. Chandos had secured tickets for the stand, and, previous to the first event, she and her little clutch fluttered and strutted about the enclosure with a notable amount of aggressive swagger. Salwey, who had entered Baber, his black "Waler," for a hurdle race, was returning from the stables when he encountered Verona and Nicky—who were walking together, apart.

"I say, would you two like to come into the paddock and see the horses?" he said.

They gladly accepted his invitation and accompanied him round the stables, where he pointed out to them the different celebrities, and gave a rapid sketch of their several careers, with their failings, foibles, victories and defeats. Suddenly Verona found herself face to face with a young man in a long racing coat, whose face seemed familiar.

"Miss Chandos!" he exclaimed, halting immediately before her, and then she recognised Captain Haig, who snatched off his cap and held out his hand, saying:

"This is, indeed, an unexpected pleasure! Pray, when did you arrive?"

"Some time ago," she answered. "And you?"

"Only this morning; I have two ponies entered, one of them a celebrated performer; her name is"—and he looked at her with steady significance—"V.C."

"Oh!" she ejaculated. "What an odd name for a pony."

"Hallo, Salwey, how are you?" he said; "I did not see you"—then he glanced interrogatively at the bony, half-caste youth, Salwey's companion.

"No," replied Salwey, "and yet I'm generally visible to the naked eye."

"Miss Chandos and I," explained Captain Haig, "are—I hope I may say—old friends; we met each other year before last at Homburg. Poor Madame!" looking at Verona as he spoke, "so she is gone. What a cheery old lady she was! Shall we take a turn round the paddock? I want to show your namesake." The young lady inclined her head and the pair strolled off, leaving Salwey and Nicky alone.

"I say," burst out Nicky, "I should not wonder if that fellow is a pal of Verona's."

"I should not wonder, either," repeated Salwey, and he became suddenly silent. Meanwhile, Verona and Captain Haig moved slowly round the paddock, where she was, as of old times, the cynosure of admiring eyes.

Captain Haig considered her critically. She looked a little pale and thin, but was as beautiful, as well turned out, as self-possessed as ever. There was the same perfection of dress and perfection of untroubled composure, and he had never forgotten her—so he imagined now; she had exercised over him a lasting and vivid fascination.

"I was in two minds about this meeting," he announced; "how glad I am now I came."

"Oh, are you?" she murmured vaguely.

"Yes, I needn't tell you that I would thankfully travel many miles to see *you*."

To this over-blown compliment Verona made no reply; she was wondering what he would say when he saw her mother and sisters!

In the distance she caught sight of Dominga, splendidly dressed, boisterous, shrill. A stranger might reasonably have suspected that this laughing and chattering was the effects of champagne—they would be mistaken. Dominga was merely intoxicated with her own supreme happiness, her extraordinary social success.

"I suppose you are out here for the cold weather?" resumed Captain Haig. "It is quite the thing to do now."

"No," she responded, "I am out for altogether—my people live here."

"Here," he repeated, "how fortunate! How I should like to make their acquaintance; I hope you will be good enough to present me to your mother."

"Certainly," she replied, with a somewhat fixed smile.

Very soon, she assured herself, there would be an end to this fool's paradise. It would be a case of he came—he saw—he fled.

In the meantime she enjoyed walking about with Captain Haig. As she glanced at his handsome, animated face, she seemed to see the background of Homburg—the crowds, the bouquets, and to feel the impression of a past sensation.

Here, indeed, in a humble way, her presence was creating a stir, "the other Miss Chandos," as she was now called, being so rarely seen; she was handsome, and graceful, and carried herself well—"as did most Eurasians," whispered onlookers.

In a distant station, no doubt, she would be considered a beauty; apparently she had picked up some young man she had known at home; he seemed very much *épris*. Well! her conquest would be but short-lived—he had but to see her people!

"Of course, your regiment is still out here?" remarked the lady to her escort.

"Yes—in a bad station—where there is no sport—we can't even manœuvre guns, the ground is all cotton soil—this is a jolly little place, I wish they'd send us here—capital duck and snipe shooting."

"Is that a sufficient reason to move troops?" she inquired.

"No—not at all—only it keeps the mess from grumbling—and the men out of the bazaar. But," with a sudden change of tone, "I want to hear more about you Miss Chandos. How have you spent the last eighteen months?"

"I was in England till August. I have been here ever since,"

"But you will soon be getting under way for the hills. I wonder what station you will select?"

"None at all—we remain down in Manora."

"What! you are not serious—you have no conception of the heat—it will kill you!"

"I think not. I believe one's first hot weather is never very trying."

"But, I assure you——"

"Captain Haig," she interrupted, "I see that you have not heard—Madame's death has made a great change in my circumstances—I am now quite poor."

He stopped for a second, and stared back into her face with a gaze of blank surprise. After an expressive pause he spoke:

"I can't imagine you—what is called 'poor.'"

"Often I cannot realise it myself—but it is true—Madame left no will—I was not related to her—all I have in the world is three hundred pounds and some diamonds, now"—with a faint smile—"you know the worst!"

"What hard luck! I am awfully sorry," he began.

"Thank you; but it is not so bad after all—I do not mind—much."

If she, who had been brought up surrounded with all that money could provide, "did not mind much," why should he? It was not her money which had attracted him, but her most beautiful, dazzling self; and she was, in his opinion, more lovely than ever, as she stood looking at him with her dark pathetic eyes.

He had recently come in for an unexpected wind-fall—a legacy of four hundred a year—he could afford to marry and live quietly; his rapid brain sketched the programme in a flash, and arranged the details of his plans with calm celerity; her three hundred pounds would buy the trousseau, etc., and he would take her to the hills for the honeymoon; they would go to Cashmere! Ah, but would Verona come? He would have a good try, at any rate!

"This is a capital little station," he remarked, with a swoop to mundane matters.

"At any rate, it seems to have made an immense impression on you," she rejoined with a smile; "this is the second time you have praised it within five minutes!"

"Yes, so it is. I think after the races I shall stop on—I have some leave due, I should like to put it in here."

"And have some duck-shooting?"

"No—I was thinking of golf with you—there are links, I know——"

"Oh, but I never play now."

"Then you must begin again—it's splendid exercise. Do you remember you started me at golf, and I'm now quite a respectable performer. I wonder," suddenly lowering his voice, "if you remember—something else?"

They were standing close to the railings which enclosed the course. Verona looked at him with a hot colour in her face.

"That I called you my Princess—you are my Princess still——"

"Haig, Haig!" shouted a man, running up; "what the devil—oh, I beg pardon"—glancing at the lady—"you are wanted in the weighing-room at once—come on!"

"The horses will be going down to the post," he said, turning to his companion; "allow me to take you back to your seat."

"No thanks," she rejoined quickly. "I know you are in a great hurry. It is only a few steps. Please do go."

"Well, I shall find you again when the race. Wish me luck," and lifting his cap he ran off.

The crowd was streaming out of the paddock as Verona turned in the same direction; her heart was beating with unusual speed. He—although he knew she was now penniless—was anxious to resume the story where it had been interrupted. At least, he was not mercenary. Formerly she had liked him—now—now—no—she could not have fallen in love in fifteen minutes' time—impossible! But circumstances alter cases; at home among a crowd of suitors he was not distinctive, here he stood forth as a hero—a champion—it might be a saviour! Undoubtedly he loved her. If he held out his hand she would accept it, and her release. Her burthen had become intolerable; her fortitude was ebbing fast. Her mother's humours, her mother's tongue were distracting; a recent long illness had weakened her self-command. She felt desperate—and if she did not love Malcolm Haig now, love would come. Perhaps he would ask her to marry him—everything pointed that way. But he had not seen her relations—how would they affect the situation? Formerly, she stood above him; he was insignificant and impecunious; but at present their positions were entirely reversed, and *he* must stoop to marry her. All these thoughts were chasing one another through her mind as Verona moved slowly forward, with the intention of joining her family.

Yes, there they were—in the middle of the second tier; and never before had they struck her as so dark, so overdressed, and so complacent. Blanche, in a scarlet felt hat and a purple velvet bolero, trimmed with mother-of-pearl (which she had bought second-hand), was an object that, so to speak, hit one in the eye; and even Pussy's sweet face, above the pride of her wardrobe, the pink feather boa, had never looked so dusky.

"Hullo, Verona!" cried Blanche, half rising as she spoke. Blanche occasionally gave the impression of being all eyes and teeth. "Do tell us about that lovely young man you were walking with—who is he?"

"I knew him at Homburg," she answered; "his name is Haig."

"Oh, do bring him up and introduce him to *me*!"

"Haig—Haig," repeated Monty, resplendent in lavender flannel and a brilliant green tie, examining the card in his hand, "Captain Haig, Enfield Regiment; he has two ponies running—one in thees race, called Dulcimer, and another, with such a funny name, entered for the Cup—V.C."

"V.C. is a ripping good pony," put in Nicky, who affected to be posted in racing matters; "Salwey says so."

"Choop! you and your Salwey," ejaculated his mother with angry energy.

Meanwhile, Salwey and Captain Haig had ascended to the top of the stand, field-glasses in hand.

"No start," remarked Salwey.

"It's that brute Blue Devil," declared his companion; "he will keep them there for twenty minutes. I would like to shoot him!"

"I daresay you would," rejoined Salwey; "he is the favourite, and sold for a thousand in the lotteries last night."

"By the way, Salwey, you saw that Miss Chandos? I never was so astonished as when I came face to face with her in the paddock here; last time we met she was at Homburg, with every man in the place at her feet."

"Including yourself," suggested Salwey.

"I should rather think so. Of course, a poor devil like me dared not lift his eyes to fifteen thousand a year."

"Then she is the original V.C."

"What a brilliant guess! She tells me her people live here, and has promised to introduce me."

"Yes," assented Salwey, with dispassionate brevity.

"I say, I've got a month's leave owing, and I intend to put it in here."

"Hullo! they are off!" and there was a dead silence.

The constantly moving dark clump had suddenly scattered into items—there was a hum-hum-hum of thundering hoofs—a cloud of dust, a flight of bright jackets, of bent backs and uplifted arms—they passed the post, and Dulcimer had won by a neck.

Captain Haig looked upon his success as a good omen. Beaming with pride—and the fact of having won eight hundred rupees—he led his pony into the paddock, and subsequently hurried out to the enclosure in order to seek for Miss Chandos, and receive her congratulations.

"Ah, here you are!" he exclaimed, when they met; "I have been hunting for you everywhere. Did you see the race well?"

"Yes—you won," she said, "I am so glad."

"It was a near thing, but Todd is a clever boy, and just pulled it off. Rajahpore seems to bring me good fortune. I shall make it my headquarters. When will you be so kind as to introduce me to your people?"

The words were hardly out of his mouth before he was surrounded by a crowd of half-castes—they actually pushed and jostled one another in order to get close to him, and an excited, over-dressed, elderly woman—

"Verona, won't you introduce me to your friend?"

Although Verona had known that this terrible moment must surely arise, she grew white to the very lips as she caught the glimmer of horrified amazement dawning in Captain Haig's blue eyes. Well, she was about to test his friendship! Would it stand the strain?

"Captain Haig," she said, and her manner was outwardly composed, "this is my mother, Mrs. Chandos."

"O-ah, how do you do?" she said effusively. "A friend of Verona's I see. Oh, we are always awfully pleased to know her friends. Let me present you to—" here she waved a soiled white-gloved hand:

"My dater Dominga." Dominga accorded him a smile—and one of her looks!

"And my dater Bellamina." Bellamina merely giggled hysterically.

"My married dater Mrs. Montague Jones, and Mr. Montague Jones—my son Nicholas."

One after the other the family bowed themselves, and shook hands with him with every evidence of the most cordial satisfaction.

At first his stupefaction was so complete, that Captain Haig was unable to utter one single word.

The beautiful Miss Chandos! the fairy Princess! Oh, she must be under some spell of enchantment! This wizened little black monkey-faced woman her mother! These awful half-castes, her sisters! Was he awake or asleep?

Salwey and Mrs. Lepell, who were standing by, understood the scene, and pitied Verona Chandos from the bottom of their hearts.

How brave and dignified she was! How high she held her head! One might have supposed that her mother was a duchess.

"I am awfulee glad your pony won," said Nicky, in his Chee-chee accent. "O-ah, my! he ees a good pony!"

His civil congratulation broke the ice, and Captain Haig recovered sufficiently to say:

"Thank you; had you any money on?"

"Oh, no-ah! oh, my no-ah," protested Mrs. Chandos. "Poor boy, he does not bet. Are you staying here?" she continued. "No?"

"Just for the races," he stammered.

"Oh, then you must come out and dine with us, and just take us as we arre. We live at Manora. Now you must not make *any* excuse"—here she put her head on one side and nodded in a manner intended to be fascinating—and which, once upon a time, had produced a gratifying result!

"I am engaged to-night, thank you," he answered stiffly.

"Arl right, then, to-morrow. Come to tiffin to-morrow—you see I will not let you off."

"But there are races again to-morrow, you know."

"My! my! so there are. Well, the day after to-morrow is Sunday—and there are no races; and if you do not come to tiffin, I am sure Verona"—here she glanced at the rigid face on her left—"will be awfully offended. You come—and bring a friend."

"Then, thank you, I will come on Sunday. There is the saddling bell, I really must go!" and in another moment Captain Haig had effected his escape.

When next he caught sight of Salwey, he went straight up to him and began:

"Good God! I never got such a shock in my life! You are an old friend, and I think you might have prepared me; I have just had a three-finger peg of whisky and soda, and even with that I feel completely knocked out of time. To think of that girl being a half-caste! It seems impossible! What awful people! Why, her mother is as dark as an ayah! Who are they?"

"Her father is in the sugar works at Manora—he was in the cavalry and——"

"See it all," interrupted Haig; "got into a scrape, married a half-caste—fired out of the Service—social collapse."

"I presume you are not *now* contemplating taking a month's leave at Rajahpore," remarked Salwey, with dry significance. "Seen the family?"

"Don't rub it in, Salwey, you savage! You cannot understand what a fearful blow I've just had." He really looked as white and shaken as if he had recently had a fall.

"You don't want to meet Miss Verona again?"

"Oh, I wish to God I'd never seen her at all!" he groaned.

"She is handsome, not to speak of being a good girl—and a lady. I'm sorry I cannot say the same for her sister Dominga. I sincerely pity Miss Verona—the shock you are struggling under is nothing to the shock she received when she came out—and beheld her parents."

"Then, she never knew!"

"Never—if she *had* known, do you suppose she would have left England? Cheer up, old man! you'll get over it—we all do."

"Bosh! you've never had anything to get over—but the measles. I'll never get over this as long as I live. She tells me that Madame de Godez left her nothing at all."

"No, her face is her fortune—her family are her misfortune," rejoined Salwey, and here he was imperatively claimed by another acquaintance.

As far as the Chandos family were concerned, the Rajahpore races had proved a brilliant success. Pussy had been supremely happy, for Alonzo was present, and they had enjoyed a good deal of chattering and giggling together (as well as a large packet of conversation lozenges), and

thrice had sallied out arm in arm to the tent, to partake of such refreshments as lemonade and cake.

Dominga had attracted a certain amount of flattering attention and won several bets. Her mother's eyes had followed her with triumph, as in a long green dress and carrying a white parasol she trailed up and down the paddock, in company with Mr. Young and Major Gale, D.S.O.; but she lost sight of her darling during the hour when she sat behind a screen in the refreshment tent—whispering with Jimmy Fielder.

Dominga and Jimmy were more than the mere acquaintance they appeared to be.

The Station had listened to their occasional chaffing and sparring, had seen them playing tennis, but never supposed—or suspected—that the Honourable Jimmy cast a second thought to the diverting and dashing Dominga. Poor little Baby Charles was her slave; but as soon as the regiment moved he would cast off her shackles, and no harm would be done! Deluded Station! Baby Charles was merely the stalking-horse—behind this harmless and acknowledged “friendship” Dominga and her new admirer screened a real love affair. In public they rarely addressed one another, but they made ample amends for this abstinence on other occasions. Oh, worthy Mrs. Grundy was being cruelly deceived!

The first day's racing came to an end. A great deal of money was lost and won; a great many hopes had been raised and shattered. Brian Salwey's Baber, splendidly ridden by himself, won the welter race, but in the supreme event of the day—“the cup,”—the favourite was hopelessly beaten—alas! the celebrated V.C. was not even placed.

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Kind-hearted Mrs. Lepell had compassion on the original “V.C.” and drove her home with her in the victoria (in order to save her from her relatives), and Brian Salwey occupied the front seat. They were a somewhat silent trio, but as they passed the Chandos family in the wagonette, their chattering resembled nothing so much as a party of excited jackdaws!

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The next day Verona did not attend the meeting; Pussy was chaperoned by her sister Blanche, and Dominga

was the triumphant companion of Mrs. Barwell. Mrs. Chandos was far too much occupied with preparations for Sunday's tiffin to spare time for any relaxation. The entertainment was to be on a sumptuous scale; she went into the bazaar herself and bought candied fruit, *pâté de fois gras*, and a fine Europe ham! (in spite of her chaffering, the latter was an expensive item); it was all to find favour in the eyes of Verona's lover; but if he would only marry the girl, and take her off her hands, the Europe ham would be a well invested outlay.

Whilst Mrs. Chandos was bargaining in the bazaar, Verona was sitting with her grandmother in the garden, reading—as the old lady's eager, but unaccustomed fingers manufactured a woollen necktie. It was the hour of sunset; birds were squabbling for the best branches—an artesian well was sending up its final creak—a native was droning as he shuffled down the road—the smell of wood smoke was in the air. Mrs. Lopez, who had been buried in thought, now suddenly put down her knitting and said:

"Well, so you have been here nearly six months, Verona! and you have wrought changes. Pussy is improved, so is Nicky; Dom copies the way you speak, and move; and your father, too, he is different; but you must not make him too content. No, no, no!"

"But why not, Nani?" she enquired, with a smile.

"Because, though your talk is to him as water to a parched-up plant, yet I must give you a word of warning. Your mother is a leetle, leetle jealous; she cannot help it, poor girl! but these talks, and readings, and games are not to her taste. No, no! sometimes when you are sitting up with your father, she is walking up and down the verandah—oh, quite mad! I have seen her face! No, no, it is not good to look at. So, my dear child, once a week for these readings—will be plenty—no more."

"Well, Nani, you know best," agreed Verona, with a sigh. "Come, Johnny!" Johnny, the squirrel, who was playing among the trellis work with some young friends, gave a whisk to his tail, and darted down to his owner, ran up her extended arm and nestled to her cheek. When the poor girl's heart ached very badly, Johnny's soft caresses and adoring friendship seemed somehow to deaden the pain. Johnny was now a pretty little fellow, though smaller than his cousins, who flocked round the verandah. He associated with them—and he wished them

to associate with Verona. On many an occasion she had entered her room, and found a dozen squirrels on her dressing-table! (Johnny's home was in a drawer, an old ramshackle drawer, which had a hole at the back; here he crept in and slept comfortably among her gloves and handkerchiefs—his nest was in a red silk necktie.) He frequently entertained company before the mirror, and no doubt his relations were delighted with his residence, but the instant his lady appeared, they scampered out. Once Johnny had been absent for a whole day, but honourably returned at nightfall, and when Verona heard him pattering in, she felt a thankfulness out of all proportion to the occasion. She loved Johnny, and could not bear to lose him. As she stroked his fur now, there was a long silence—she was thinking of Malcolm Haig's face as she had last seen it. She was firmly persuaded that she would never look upon it again. She had been mad to harbour hopes of release.

"See—see, Verona," said her grandmother, "I have dropped two—three stitches. Child, has it seemed to you that there is a change in Dominga?"

"No, Nani."

"Well, she has got a lover, or else I am an old fool."

"What makes you think so?"

"Many little things. She is quiett, she no longer squabbles—her thoughts are enough—they are pleasant. She dresses herself for hours—she writes much—she sees us no more, she is in another world with her secret. Oh, it is a big one—can you guess?"

"No; as far as I have seen, Dominga has many admirers, and one—who is more—little Mr. Young—but she does not care for him. Dominga is always reserved and mysterious—she likes having secrets."

"Perhaps she is wise! You know the proverb: 'Never make known one's wealth, one's remedies, one's lover, where one has hidden money, the good works one does, the insults one has received, or the debts one has contracted.'"

"Dominga makes known her debts, Nani—she owes two hundred rupees in the bazaar, and is at her wits' end."

"Chitt! she will coax her mother, and she will pay," rejoined Mrs. Lopez, with an air of easy confidence; "and here is Rosa coming back. My, my, what parcels! Oh, she has been spending a lot of money!" adding, with a laugh, "she will be *so* cross!"

The preparation for the tiffin party was on a sumptuous scale; there was a brand new white cloth—flowers—and dessert. The family wore their very best garments; even Mr. Chandos had put on a suit of old blue serge, in order to do honour to Verona's friend. Verona herself, with two great red spots on her cheeks, inwardly prayed that her expected guest would not come—and her prayer was answered.

Half-past one—no Captain Haig—a quarter to two—Nicky ran to the corner of the tennis ground; the Trotter family were all in their verandah—for it had not been concealed from them that Mrs. Chandos expected two officers to tiffin.

Two o'clock, yet still tarried the wheels of Captain Haig's chariot. A gloomy silence now descended and settled upon the Chandos family like a pall.

Half-past two! a gurrah at the factory struck "three."
"No-ah, he is not coming," announced Dominga, with a conviction that tolled the knell of her mother's hopes. Nicky and Dominga were clamouring for food, and a certain portion of the long-delayed meal was hastily served. But Mrs. Chandos was too excited to eat; her mind was dwelling on the triumph of the Trotters, and her costly useless outlay—unfortunately, she could not return the ham, for it had been boiled. Her temper, which had been gradually rising like a storm at sea, now burst, and dashed itself like a tornado upon Verona. It was not the recreant Captain Haig with whom Mrs. Chandos was furious; his unlucky friend represented the scapegoat.

Verona sat white and speechless, whilst her mother overwhelmed her with a torrent of reproaches for her airs, her uselessness, the heavy cost of her maintenance, and her most devilish pride. For when once a Eurasian loses her temper and her self-control, she hardly knows what she says. The tempest like the typhoon is soon over—but while it lasts, it is bad, very bad.

Mrs. Chandos finally concluded with one of her celebrated screaming fits, and Mrs. Lopez—well accustomed to these hysterical outbursts—led her away sobbing and exhausted, in order to console and soothe her in her own apartment.

CHAPTER XXIX

THE band had played the men back to barracks to the rousing tune of "When Johnny comes marching Home again"; it was eleven o'clock on Sunday morning, and Captain Haig, who had been to Parade Service, walked across the maidan to pay a morning call. His thoughts were still full of one subject—Verona Chandos, and he was anxiously debating whether to go to Manora or not? The question had kept him awake for hours; it had harassed him through the Book of Common Prayer, and the text of the padre's sermon had been, "To go to Manora or not?" Something in Verona's eyes magnetised him and drew him towards her, to be instantly driven away by her swarm of terrible relations, and they really were her own kindred; he had heard all about them at the mess. Malcolm Haig was on his way to see his cousin (once removed), Jimmy Fielder, and to have a friendly "bukh" with him in his own diggings. He knew all about Master Jimmy's affairs, and why he was now languishing on the plains of India. Lord Highstreet, who was a cast-iron parent of the so-called old school, had cut off the supplies, and sent his heir into banishment—sent him to the East in order to be out of harm's way, for, by all accounts, there were no widows in India. The native women were very properly burnt, and the Europeans were of the innocuous species, termed "grass," and not matrimonially dangerous. Captain Fielder was sprawling on a Bombay chair in the verandah, still clad in a smart blue silk sleeping suit and a pair of straw bathing slippers, and was engaged in reading a French novel, and smoking a Russian cigarette.

"Hullo!" he exclaimed, half rising, as he descried his cousin.

"Hullo!" repeated the visitor, "so this is what you call going to church!"

"There's a chair—here's a box of cigarettes. I never go to church—within four walls. I believe in parson green fields."

"So I see," assented Malcolm, as he seated himself and glanced significantly at the yellow book.

"You have been, of course—hence this air of virtue. Needs must when C. O. drives; your tent is pitched in the

old man's compound, and you were under the paternal eye."

"Bosh!" blowing a cloud.

"Many in church?"

"Crowds—rather good singing."

"Ah! then—Dom Chandos was there."

"If you mean a tall, pale girl, with a soprano that nearly lifted the roof—she was——"

"Isn't it a marvellous voice? It's an awful shame she is lost out here——"

"Lost? She seems to know her way about fairly well——"

"I mean—her voice. If that girl had a chance at home at the Gaiety—or the halls—she'd become the craze; and she can dance a bit, too——"

"I knew the other Miss Chandos at home," said Captain Haig—slowly—knocking the ash off his cigarette in a preoccupied fashion. "She was the beauty of Homburg."

"Oh, well, I don't admire her one little bit. A beauty at home is not a beauty here, and vice versa; I grant you she has a fine pair of unhappy, dark eyes, but give me her sister. I like a girl with a spice of the devil——"

"Cannot say that I do! How are you getting along, Jimmy?"

"Oh, all right. The pater thought he was sending me to penal servitude, but it's rather jolly. They are not a bad lot—these Muffineers—awfully sporting, but it's a rotten regiment. However, the duty is easy."

"How do you kill time?"

"Oh, there's polo, and squash rackets, some fair shooting—duck and snipe, partridge; quite a lot of small game——"

"And no other game?—eh, Jimmy? Sport was never in your line. Piccadilly, Hurlingham, the theatres and halls, used to be your orbit."

"Oh, I put in my days all right, though the climate undermines my moral character, and I eat enormously, and sleep many hours. When the hot weather comes, I'll trek for the hills!"

"Ah—I hope you won't get into mischief there. Had your father consulted *me*, I should have told him he was turning you out of the frying-pan into the fire!"

"Bah! the pater is only terrified that I should marry, that's all. No one marries in India—we carry on——"

"Oh, do you? And—what about Mrs. de Lacy? Have you dropped her?"

"I wish to goodness she'd drop *me*, Malcolm!" declaiming with uplifted hand and cigarette. "The pater was right there, though I'm the last man to tell him so! Nita is awfully up-to-date—plays bridge like a book, smokes like a chimney, has a ripping good figure—but twelve years, you know—I say, come, it's a good bit of a start, eh?"

"On the wrong side—yes. Uncle Horace wrote me a raving letter—he has a tremendous idea of what he calls 'A suitable alliance.' I fancy I see him and your father together at the club, wagging their heads over your 'case.' I bet your Uncle Horace prescribed India——"

"He has never been out, eh?" and Jimmy grinned significantly from ear to ear. "Well, I can't say I bear the old boy a grudge. I'm glad I came. Every one does India now; the Taj is as familiar as Charing Cross. I've been here four months—and the days have just slid along. I've had a blazing good time!"

"Ahem! Then—James—I'm much afraid you're at your old games. And yet—there are not many women of your style in the station——"

"That's true, oh, observant sage! Find the lady? By the way"—giving the conversation a sudden twist, "what are you doing to-day?"

"I don't quite know. Mrs. Chandos—asked me to tiffin——"

"What infernal cheek!" half sitting up; "you are not going to be such an ass as to give yourself away like that. If you do, she will nail you. Who enters there, leaves hope behind."

"What do you mean——?"

"O, you know—and you know too, that it's no good hankering after that girl—not a little bit. I grant you she is handsome and ladylike, but—keep her relations well in your mind's eye. Think of the future cousins in the bazaars."

"Oh, you be hanged! Of course, you have never been near the place?"

"I should say not! The Chandos bungalow is out of bounds; Chandos himself is a shady old chap, who shows his sense by never leaving cards on a mess, and never enters the station. His "Mem sahib" is all over the shop, flitting in and out of the club, and hanging on to the coat-

tails of society. Of course we meet her at times in the reading room, and to speak to. She has a whole clan of brown relations in the city, called Jones. The man only wants a turban to be a khitmatgar ! ”

“ Then you don’t know them at all ? ”

“ Oh, yes; I know Dom—she is different; she is not off the cab rank, and is rare good fun, and says the most amusing and unexpected things. We are tremendous pals, though I need scarcely remark that we don’t publish the fact on the club notice board, or in the market place.”

“ Um—no; but where else—— ? ”

“ We write one another nice little notes. Our post office is a book in the library—last volume on fourth shelf. It is called ‘ Two Kisses ’—rather neat, eh—quite my own idea—— ”

“ Do you merely correspond ? ”

“ Oh, no,” responded Jimmy, with an airy flip of his cigarette, “ on moonlight nights I drive out to Manora after mess; I have a rare stepper, and the cart has rubber tyres. I wait behind a little tope of trees for Dom, and we go for a couple of hours spin. It’s all as still as death and as bright as day; we have the whole country to ourselves. I’m not a fellow for humbugging about scenery, and the picturesque, but I tell you, Malcolm, that there’s something in the quiet, still, spreading plains—with a silver shine on them, and the river here and there—flashing at one like a looking-glass—that makes me feel quite—er—er—enthusiastic—and impressed, and all that sort of thing ! ”

“ Oh! and I should like to know how Mr. Chandos would be impressed and all that sort of thing, if he met you and his daughter scouring the country in the middle of the night ? ”

“ Bless your heart, there’s not a soul in the secret but my syce. We always get home all right, and Dom creeps in as easily as a roof cat.”

“ If you will take my advice, Master Jimmy, you won’t go *too* far.”

“ Ten to fifteen miles is our limit—— ”

“ Oh, shut up! You know what I mean; that girl, by the look of her, has the real tropical temperament. If you play any of your tricks you will find yourself in the wrong box! Unless I’m mistaken, Nature has given her teeth and claws, and the power to use them. Mind you, it’s

not for nothing she's called the Red Cat—and I never trust anyone with that particular shade of red hair——”

“Red hair! Come, I like that! And what about your own crop of carrots, my boy? I admire Dom's hair; it is splendid—the true Venetian colour, whilst you are on the ginger shade——”

“Carrot and ginger! What mixed metaphors!”

“No! vegetables both! I grant you that Dom is not an everyday girl; she is quick and all alive, O! and she never bores, but keeps your wits on the stretch all the time. She is not a bit like any woman I have ever met before, and that is what appeals to me. She is awfully plucky, too. One night we drove over a buffalo, and were pitched out on the road, and, I give you my word, she simply shrieked with laughter.”

“Pray, what is going to be the end of this?” enquired his cousin in a cool, judicial tone.

“Oh, I don't know——”

“Still in the early chapters of the romance, eh——?”

“Yes; when it begins to get a bit—er—dull, and we are bored—we will say ta-ta; that's all!”

“All?” ejaculated his visitor.

“Well—I say, hang it, Malcolm! A fellow must have some amusement!”

“Play to you, and death to her—reputation.”

“Oh, Dom will take right good care of that—I tell you——”

“And I tell you that if you play fast and loose with Dom, she is just the sort of girl that would—kill you!”

“Oh, Lord! here we have a five-act tragedy in two lines! A tragedy generally makes me howl with laughter. Well, now I must go in, and shave and dress. I say, if you like, I'll drive you round by Manora this afternoon. It's a pretty sort of settlement—lots of trees and greenery—on the river side. We won't stop, but I will point you out the roof which shelters the Misses Chandos—your lady love, and mine!”

And tossing the end of his cigarette into a bush, he called for his boy, and disappeared indoors.

CHAPTER XXX

THAT same Sunday afternoon Mrs. Chandos, having recovered from her "seizure," went out into the front garden in order to "eat the air" in solitude. The Trotters were also abroad, but she turned her back upon them, and walked down the little drive and gazed along the road with an expression of grim resentment. But what was this which she beheld speeding towards her? A grey stepping horse, a dog cart, and two gentlemen—and at what a pace they came! Indeed, they were all but past before the driver discovered her, and pulled the grey on his haunches.

"Oh, good day, Mrs. Chandos," said Captain Haig; "I am so awfully sorry I was not able to come to tiffin. I was—prevented," here Jimmy gave him an approving nudge, "from accepting your kind invitation."

"Aye, and so you have come to tea instead. All right, come in—come in——"

"I am afraid we cannot wait, thank you."

"Oh, my! but why not? The girls are at home," and she put her hand on the wheel of the cart as if she would detain them by physical force.

Captain Haig merely shook his head.

"And poor Verona will be *so* disappointed," urged the persistent matron.

"I am sorry, Mrs. Chandos," interposed Jimmy, leaning across, "but I must really take him away. We have an important engagement."

"Ah, but here is Dominga!" cried her mother in a tone of triumph, as Dom, in a French muslin costume, came flitting to the gate.

"You know my daughter, Dominga, Captain Haig?"

Dominga immediately took her mother's place, and began to converse with Jimmy, whilst Mrs. Chandos stood aside and contemplated the scene with a bursting heart. She had hoped for a mere captain, but here was "the Honourable" talking away to Dom as if he had known her all his life! And the Trotters were staring over the wall, like so many stuck pigs!

In another moment the grey horse had sprung forward, and the ecstatic vision was swept from her contemplation. Still there yet remained the Trotters! She turned herself about, looked at them with rude significance, and nodded with imperial condescension. Who would suppose, from

her manner, that her neighbour was a close, intimate friend of many years' standing, and had once nursed her like a sister, when she and Nani were both down with jaundice?

No, no; she had forgotten all that. Those common Trotter people must be taught their place, and with this determination Mrs. Chandos proceeded indoors.

On Sunday evening the chaplain from Rajahpore held service in the little conventicle at Manora; his congregation consisted of the sugar people and a few native Christians. On this particular day Pussy and Nicky were the sole representatives of the Chandos household. As Mrs. Lepell and her nephew were walking homewards they overtook the pair.

"Pray what has become of Verona this evening?" enquired the lady.

"She has such a bad headache!"

"That is unusual. What has given it to her?"

"Crying, I think," replied the ever indiscreet Pussy. "She cried a lot this afternoon."

"I hope she has not had bad news?"

"Oh, no—ah! but mother asked a friend of hers to lunch—that Captain Haig—and he never came," announced Pussy, regardless of her brother's angry nip. "And mother was so vexed."

"Poor Verona!" said Mrs. Lepell to herself, as they came to the gate of the Chandos abode.

"Look here, Pussy, will you run in and ask your mother if you and Verona may come over to dinner? It will cheer up your sister. Don't be long, like a good girl."

As they waited, she turned to her nephew and said: "Poor girl, I suppose he could not face them! Brian, what makes you look so solemn?"

"My sins and the sermon," he answered with a short laugh. "By the way, Aunt Liz, I'm on the track of those jewels; I believe I've got a clue, but mum's the word."

At this moment they were joined by Pussy, who panted out, "Thanks awfully, Mrs. Lepell; we may both come."

At dinner that evening Verona was unusually white and silent. "So," said Salwey to himself, "she has been crying for that fellow. Little she knows how Pussy let her namesake out of the bag."

The chief part of the conversation was sustained by Mr. Lepell and Pussy, who, though a little daunted by the entrées and coloured wine glasses, was much elated to find herself dining in the big house. Her host noted how she

was improved; she had ceased to giggle at the end of every sentence, and was really quite a pretty girl, with her liquid dark eyes, beautiful teeth and radiant smile.

Mr. Lepell was astonished when he realised that this sparkling, happy-looking guest was only little Pussy Chandos! They were discussing dreams, and during a lull in the talk her thin staccato tones were heard saying:

"Oh, I do dream such strange dreams! They seem so real! Two or three times I dream of Dominga—always the same; she walks through my room in her hat with a wrap on her arm—just as if she was there. Last week I dreamt of her, and called out, and she put her finger on her lips and was gone. Now, what can it mean, do you think?"

One of the Khitmatgars in waiting caught the eye of his mate. *They* knew, but this by-play was lost on the company—with one exception.

"Did you tell your sister of these visions?" enquired Salwey.

"Oh, yes; and she said it was only nightmare. I think I had been having too much curried fish—I'm awfully fond of curry; when I see curry I must eat it."

"Now, Brian," said his aunt, "you have scarcely opened your lips—do amuse us! What are you looking so glum about? If you are thinking of the usurers, I will allow you to take a short canter on your hobby."

"It's nothing to joke about, Aunt Liz," rejoined Salwey, suddenly rousing himself. "You know old Hirzat Sing—they have sold him up at last!"

"Oh, no! Poor old fellow—he has been in difficulties for years!"

"Yes," assented her husband; "he borrowed money for his son's wedding, and it was his ruin. His son is dead, and he has been getting deeper and deeper into debt every year. A slave to the soil and the money-lender—working from dawn to dark to keep himself and his wife alive—and feed the daughter of the horse-leech."

"One would suppose he could throw off the yoke, and the strangling hundred per cent., and go elsewhere," said Mrs. Lepell.

"He is too old," replied Salwey, "and he would say, 'Kahn jaga?'—whither shall I go? He clings to his ancestral acres with the extraordinary love of home, which is a passion in a Hindoo. There is a saying, 'The rent is heavy, the debts are many, but still he loves his field.'

Now that Hirzat Sing is getting infirm and stiff, and his wife is blind, he is of no further use to the soucar, who has thrust him from his home, after making hundreds, aye, thousands of rupees out of him. The original debt was but two hundred and fifty; now he will end his days as a bazaar mendicant, after slaving for sixty years."

"This is very bad, Brian; can you do nothing?"

"I'm afraid not, Aunt Liz; poor old Hirzat Sing is in the grip of Saloo—a notable money-lender, known only to us by name; I believe he lives in Poona, but his meshes are all over the district; and he does his business secretly; he is the most fierce and rapacious of the whole lot. Once or twice I've thought I had him. I believe from what I hear that the wretch has no less than five hundred victims on his books—in his web, I should say."

"Poor old Herzat Sing!" said Mrs. Lepell. "I shall look him up to-morrow. We could get him some job about the place, eh, Tom?"

"Yes, my dear; but already we are fairly well supplied with your *protégés*."

"Don't be horrid, Tom. I have, and so have you, the greatest respect for Herzat Sing. He is one of Nature's noblemen."

"And I have to find him some job—such as weeding or sweeping—at five rupees a month. Well, I'll do what I can."

"By the way, Miss Verona," turning to his silent sad-faced guest, "I saw in *The Times* the death of a Chandos of Charne Hall. I believe he's related to your father? I am not sure—but I think he is his cousin."

"Oh my, yes; it must be father's cousin," burst in Pussy. "He never speaks of him, but mother does; she says he was such—a—thief and a budmash—he—ought to have been put in jail!"

"Pussy!" remonstrated her sister.

"If it is Sidney, it will make a great difference to your father," continued Mr. Lepell, addressing Verona.

"I don't believe anything would make any difference to him," then she dropped her voice as she added the word "now."

"Dear me! How dull we have all been!" exclaimed Mrs. Lepell. "I really think we shall have to introduce the Chinese system of having little slips of paper inscribed with jokes, which they solemnly hand to each other during intervals in the conversation."

"I wish I could remember a few," said Salwey; "but they run in at one ear and out at the other! I wonder if this would do? A certain schoolboy was asked, 'Who was Titus?' 'Titus,' he promptly replied, 'was a gentleman who wrote a letter in the Bible. Then, as a Roman general, he sacked Jerusalem. Subsequently, having adopted the name of Oates, he headed an abominable insurrection.' How is that, Aunt Liz?"

"Much too historical and stupid," she said as she rose. "I suppose you wished to drive us off, and therefore we depart. Good-bye!"

The three ladies were followed into the verandah by coffee and the men, and Salwey, drawing up a low chair beside Verona, said:

"Did you ever see this pretty thing before?" As he spoke he dropped a ring into her lap.

She picked it up and exclaimed, "I should think so—my long-lost property! Where did you find it?"

"Can you swear to it?"

"I can do more, if necessary. I was in the shop when auntie bought it—a black pearl, set in brilliants. I wanted all emeralds, but she insisted. Look here," and she unpinned a plain, gold safety brooch, "do you see this?" In another moment her nimble fingers had unscrewed the cluster in the ring, and screwed it into the brooch.

"There!" handing it back, and slipping the ring on her finger. "It makes three separate articles—a ring, a brooch and a bangle. Are you convinced?"

"I am. May I have the brooch and ring? And I must ask you to swear to your property before Uncle Tom, who is a magistrate."

"Very well, though I feel slightly alarmed; it sounds so formal—as if I had been breaking the law."

"Do you know that you have done me an immense service, for you have not only given me a clue to the recovery of your jewels. This," holding up the safety-pin, "will get a notorious evil-doer two years' hard labour, with a shorn head, and chains, in Rajahpore jail. Now, I wish you could put me on the track of Saloo, the money-lender!"

CHAPTER XXXI

THE change in Dominga, which had not escaped the sharp eyes of old Nani, gradually became visible to her sister. Dom's whole mind was evidently concentrated on something, or someone—who could that someone be? She was abstracted, silent and forgetful—at one moment in the maddest and most unaccountable spirits, at another sunk in the depths of ferocious gloom. Dominga was in love—and for the first time in her existence. Ambition and a hungry vanity had impelled her to strain every effort in order to attract “The Honourable” (as he was called in Manora), and her aim was accomplished but too easily. On the occasion of their second meeting he exclaimed:

“Lovely Dom! won't you be real good friends with me? *won't* you like me—and let us see a great deal of one another?”

This appeal she had laughed at and “pooh-poohed.” Now to see “Jimmy” was all she lived for. She was indifferent to position; she had no desire to snatch a coronet—all she cared for was Jimmy himself.—If Jimmy ceased to love her, if he were to leave her, the whole world would become wrapped in darkness—and she would die.

Meanwhile, none suspected their intimacy. Dom was an accomplished actress, and full of resource and courage; she concealed an impassioned love affair behind the cloak of a duly licensed (warranted “harmless”) flirtation with her unhappy dupe, “Baby Charles.”

These two strings to her bow were a severe tax on Dominga. Admirable performer as she was, she found it difficult to keep both strings in tune, and to wear an everyday air of smiling self-possession. She worshipped Jimmy, and with regret, it must be added, that she now secretly detested Baby Charles. These devastating emotions had their natural result; she became nervous, thin and restless as the sea itself; sleep and appetite both left her, and yet Dom retained her looks—she had a sort of glorified expression; a soft brilliance in her eyes had replaced their former challenging stare.

Towards the middle of February the nights were becoming warm. At any rate, Verona found it difficult to rest; and on more than one occasion she rose, slipped on her shoes and a long cloak, and set forth to wander along

the old familiar path by the river. The air was cool and refreshing after a close room (they had not yet begun punkahs), and one night she was tempted to stroll beyond her usual bounds, towards a certain lonely spot—the desolate garden of an old bungalow which had fallen into ruins. This garden was a jungle of trees and creepers; bamboos, loquats and apricots, struggled fiercely for spaces—beautiful roses, gone mad, threw their shoots in all directions. Here the blue jay and the golden orioles were undisturbed—it was a wilderness of flowers and birds, far from the hurry and dust of the outer world. Few ever passed that way, because the old ruined house had an evil name, and was reputed to be haunted. Verona had discovered this sanctuary, and many a half-hour she spent, sitting on the steps of the verandah, whilst Johnny darted about among the neighbouring branches, and played on a circular stone platform close by—"a chabootra," where in former days the family had enjoyed the air and tea—raised a few inches from undesirable insects, and snakes. To this retreat Verona had now wound her steps, and as she made her way among the bushes she was aware that someone else was in the garden—someone who was singing "The Jewel of Asia." She approached, and thrusting aside the high plumes of the grass blossoms, beheld a tableau which rooted her to the spot.

Dominga—on the chabootra—wearing a low evening dress, her hair crowned by a wreath of passion flowers, was not merely singing, but dancing! As she sang she held with extended arms her flowing white skirts, and weaved the most dainty measures. She moved with the true "bird-like step" and the swaying, undulating grace of her renowned grandmother, the Nautch girl!

Naturally Dom was not singing or dancing solely for her own amusement, or the entertainment of roof cats, owls and night-jars. As she executed her fairy-like *pas seul* on the stone platform, the "Honourable," cigarette in mouth, lounged by the edge of the verandah, and clapped applause.

Whilst Verona stood transfixed, this pretty scene fell to pieces, for Dom, in answer to a gesture from Jimmy, turned, saw her sister, and uttered a piercing shriek.

"Hush—sh!" said her companion, rising simultaneously to his feet—and the occasion. "Quite the time of day to be out—is it not, Miss Chandos?" sauntering towards her as he spoke. "I wandered over to

Manora, and had the good luck to meet first your sister—and now yourself!”

“Oh, Verona!” cried Dominga, “what a fright you did give me! I thought you were the ghost! You know this place is haunted by those Mutiny people who were killed here.”

“I assure you that I was equally startled,” rejoined the other in a frosty voice.

“I suppose you came out for a breath of air—same as myself,” continued Dom, with unsurpassed effrontery—and her fairness was dazzling in the moonlight.

A breath of air! and she dressed in her best gauze ball gown—white satin shoes, and all!

Verona made no answer, and being painfully conscious of the great deficiencies of her own toilette, without further formality effected a rapid retreat.

“I say! I call that most beastly bad luck,” exclaimed Jimmy, looking after the departing figure. “Does she twig anything?”

“She must—unless she is an idiot.”

“She won’t give us away, Dom! You must make that all right, old girl!”

“If I can.”

“If you cannot, there will be the devil to pay!”

“What particular devil?” enquired his lady love.

“Well, your *father* might kick up a row.”

Dominga laughed with infinite mockery.

“Or our old man—who is supposed to keep me under lock and key? You must square it, won’t you, darling?”

“Of course, I will do whatever you like, Jim. I always do.”

And Verona was fully as uncomfortable as the lovers. She crept guiltily into bed, and once there her heart beat so fast she could not sleep. So this was Dom’s secret—Jimmy Fielden! How well she had kept it! and yet how reckless to choose an open spot, not far from the house, for entrancing her lover with song and dance!

They must have met frequently—this was no unusual occasion. Verona, unable to sleep or close her eyes, beheld again, with inward vision, the scene: the background of flowering shrubs, the white floating figure with weaving arms and gliding grace—Jimmy, sitting with his elbows on his knees, his hat on the back of his head, cigarette in mouth, gazing and glowering like a masher in a music

hall—where no doubt, for the moment, he believed himself to be!

And Dominga was her own sister—what should she do? What must she do?

At this moment a stealthy footfall entered the room—it was Dom come to answer that question in person.

"Verona," she whispered, "are you asleep?"

"No—I wish to goodness I was."

"You know our secret."

"I'm not so sure that I do!"

"But you see what we are. Jimmy adores me, and I adore him."

"If so, why does he not come here and adore you in broad daylight?"

"Because of people's tongues—think of the spite of the Trotters and Watkins, and Blanche's chum, Mrs. Wandle. Verona, dear," and she fell on her knees beside the bed, "will you promise to say nothing of what you saw. Promise, and I will do anything—anything."

"I will promise, if you will listen to what I have to say first."

Dominga, with an impatient "Ch-a-ah!" sat suddenly down on the floor.

"I have seen Captain Fielden's father. He is a curious old man—very proud, and very hard—and enormously rich."

"How rich?" asked Dom, raising herself a little.

"Oh, about forty thousand a year."

"Rupees?"

"No, pounds; there are no rupees in England. He has eyes like two bits of granite, and a long chin; he wears a tall white hat and black stock, and lifts his feet high off the ground as if they did not fit him. I've often laughed at his way of walking. He is crazy about pedigree and position, and Jimmy is his only remaining son. If he makes an unsatisfactory marriage—for instance, if he were to marry a girl without position or fortune—it would be his deathblow!"

"So much the better," said Dominga, springing to her feet.

"But Dom, do listen. Captain Fielden can never make you his wife—do give him up."

"Do you think he will give *me* up?" she demanded, in a low, grating voice.

"Well, promise me at least that you won't meet him at night again. Promise, Dom on your word of honour?"

"I promise," she responded, in a passionate whisper; "and now, Verona, listen! if you are false to me, I will"—she paused for a second, in order to formulate a threat and deal adequate vengeance. Her ear caught a rustle on the dressing-table—yes! there was naughty little Johnny, out of his bed at that time of night, sitting up, and watching the sisters with his two glittering black eyes.

"I won't say I'll kill you," resumed Dom, "for you wouldn't care—oh, I know your mind—but I will kill Johnny, I will burn him—yes, I'll roast him alive, and *that* would hurt you!"

"Oh, Dom, don't say such hideous things! Of course, you may depend on me; but you—can I really trust you? Will you swear to me on the Bible?"

"No; but I'll swear to you on my soul! will that satisfy you?"

Dominga Chandos set but a nominal value on her soul. What little soul she had belonged to Jimmy Fielden, and she broke her oath within three days.

CHAPTER XXXII

THE next event of importance was a grand dinner party given by Mrs Lepell, to which she invited Verona alone. Mrs. Chandos was loudly indignant because Dominga had been overlooked, for she had learnt all particulars of the festivity from her ayah, who heard it from the Lepell's khansamah. There were to be no less than twenty-four guests. These included Colonel and Mrs. Palgrave, Miss Richards, Mr. Young, the Deputy-Inspector-General of Police, Mr. Salwey, a Sir Rupert and Lady Maxwell, who were staying at the Dak bungalow, and various other notabilities; altogether it was to be an unusually smart affair. Poor Verona, who was not particularly anxious to be present, was compelled to listen patiently whilst her mother harped from morning till night on Mrs. Lepell's many delinquencies and Dominga's grievances.

The evening arrived, and Verona, with Pussy's volunteered assistance, began to make her toilette. She arranged her hair carefully, and put on a dress, relic of happier times, a white *crêpe de chine*; it had come from the atelier of Laferrière, and was a simple but exquisite gown. Pussy was loud in her expressions of admiration.

"Oh—it is beautiful, beautiful, beautiful! Verona. If you will sit down before the glass, I will clasp your pearls round your neck, and then you are ready. Now, what do you think mother did to-day?"

Verona shook her head in hopeless ignorance. Her mother did so many things—she resembled a little black ant, and was never idle.

"You know she is awfully mad that Dominga was not invited, especially as Mr. Young is going, so she wrote a note over to Mrs. Lepell to ask her if she could possibly squeeze in Dominga anywhere? The answer came back in two minutes to say that Mrs. Lepell was extremely sorry, but the number of her guests was quite complete."

Verona, listening to this little tale, blushed for her mother to the roots of her hair. At this moment the door of the verandah was burst open, and Mrs. Chandos herself appeared; she looked both angry and excited.

"My! whatt ages you have been," she declared, as she surveyed Verona's toilette with glittering, malevolent eyes.

"I was helping Nicky with his sums, and I forgot the time. I am afraid I am a little late."

"I am afraid you will be *very* late," cried Mrs. Chandos, with a queer, hysterical laugh, and she suddenly swept a pail of water from behind her dress, and deluged her unfortunate daughter from head to foot. At first the shock was such that Verona could do nothing but gasp, and gasp; then, to the amazement of the spectators, she burst out laughing.

What an object she was! the water streaming down her hair and nose, and a pool in her lap, her gown a mere soaked rag. Verona's laugh was an inspiration! If for days she had been preparing an effective retort to her mother's malicious action, she could not have hit the mark more cleverly. Mrs. Chandos stood disarmed, astounded, humiliated.

"I am afraid I shall now be very late indeed," said Verona as she rose, dripping from head to foot, and looked at her parent with extraordinary composure, "so late that it will not be worth my while to go at all. If you will all kindly retire, I should like to change my wet clothes."

Without a single word Mrs. Chandos slunk out, bucket in hand, but Pussy lingered to profess her sympathy and dismay.

"Now, what can you say? Oh, you must send an excuse?" she enquired, with an awestruck face.

"You can say I have had a severe wetting," rejoined Verona. In her heart of hearts she was not sorry to be compelled to remain at home. These local gatherings had nothing to offer her but pain and humiliation.

"A severe wetting!" cried Pussy, "they will not believe it. There has been no rain for weeks!"

"I cannot help that," retorted her sister, "but if you want to make it appear plausible, you may add that I have gone to bed."

Pussy sat down and scrawled off the following note:

"Dear Mrs. Lepell,—

"Please excuse Verona. She has had a *bad* wetting, and is gone to *bed*."

"Believe me,

"Yours sincerely,

"BELLAMINA CHANDOS."

The true state of the case was not long in finding its way to Mrs. Lepell's ears. She could not help laughing at the incident as she related it to her nephew, but she felt more sorry than ever for Verona Chandos.

It was eleven o'clock at night. The bungalow was silent, the lights were extinguished everywhere except in the office, and here we behold Mrs. Chandos and Abdul Buk face to face across a table, exceedingly grave and busy. In front of each was a large ledger, and as Mrs. Chandos read out figures and totals Abdul Buk said "Jehan, jehan," and ticked off the duplicate in pencil; occasionally Mrs. Chandos would point out discrepancies and losses, and a certain amount of argument and wrangling would ensue.

"There is that widow in the Gorra bazaar; she owes me a hundred rupees."

"With interest," amended Abdul.

"She has only had twenty-five in her hand."

(By which it will be seen that Mrs. Chandos, like Ralph Nickleby, expected to get two pence for every half-penny.)

"She worked very hard, and borrowed the money to pay for her husband's funeral."

"It was my money, though, and I will have it back, and the interest. *You* know what to do," said this daughter of the horse leech. "Then there is that girl who drowned herself in the well; I shall never get an anna from her now, and she is down in my books for two hundred rupees."

"You lost nothing by *her*—she had paid the principal over and over."

"My losses have been heavy this last six months. Again, there is that man who took poison."

"What you call losses are trade risks, and but nothing when you take into consideration your enormous gains. No one does such business as Saloo"—he gave a sort of grunting laugh. "I paid a big sum into the Bank of Bengal in the name of your mother, as usual. Oh—ho! What a good thing it is that she leaves business to you, and thinks she has only a few hundred rupees. Bee Bee Chandos, you are a very rich woman. Here he pulled up a large bag, made of knotted twine, and poured on the table a quantity of rupees and notes. These his companion proceeded to count with eager, greedy fingers

(and a celerity that was positively astonishing and indicated long habit), arranging them in piles of fifty.

"Four thousand, seven hundred," she said at last. "I don't know what you call rich; I have been twenty years in the business; I have worked hard, and I pay you and your agents well."

"It is a difficult, risky business," protested Abdul Buk. "I go in fear of my life of that Salwey; if I am found out, it is ruin for me; my character will be gone. If it was supposed that I was the agent of the greatly-feared Saloo, surely the very beggars would spit upon me—I would not have a friend in the world."

"Money is a good friend," said Mrs Chandos sententially.

"Ay," assented Abdul Buk, "and you must have laks by now."

He paused and looked at her reflectively; then he said:

"Why do you not spend it instead of hoarding? Why not enjoy the money before"—he paused, then he added—"you are found out."

"Cha-a-h! I will never be found out!" she answered shrilly. "I love handling money; it is in my blood. I get it from Lopez, my father. He left me no fortune with all his once great riches."

"Of a truth his riches did *him* no good; he died a ruined man."

"But he left me a legacy," rejoined Mrs. Chandos; "his books, his accounts, the names of his clients and his methods. I found them in an old box, when my mother came to live with me. They have been of value."

"Take my advice and wind up now," urged Abdul Buk. "I feel a presentiment of evil. Lo! I see a little cloud, like a man's hand, as it says in your book which I have read. I fear Salwey—some day he will discover all; he is working, working, working. You will have your veil torn off, and be known through the province as the accursed Saloo, whilst I may be cast into prison. Anyway, I lose my honour."

"Abdul Buk, you are a coward; you ought to be the old woman, I, the man."

"So you say," he exclaimed with sullen scorn.

"What of Razat Sing?"

"He wails and weeps and prays to be suffered to die in his ancestral home."

"He is a tiresome old fool and can no longer till the ground to good profit. All I made last year on that acre and a half of cane was one hundred rupees—he must go."

"It will kill him!"

"Even so!" was the callous reply; "it were time he were dead! And now what of the money belonging to my daughter, Verona? Have you put it out to a good charge?"

"Yes; four thousand rupees," he replied, "to build an oil mill; twenty-five per cent. They cannot pay, so the interest will be compound."

"And the jewels, Abdul. Are there no tidings?"

"No, though Salwey seeks them everywhere."

"True; he wanted to search here, but I said no. He might have found other matters. Yet it is past belief that there is no trace of them. What sayest thou, Abdul?"

Abdul nodded his head three times, but made no other reply.

"I put them in the bag myself. It was not locked, but I locked the press, and the door of the *dufta*, and some one came in and broke the press at the back and took the necklace, the watch, a gold bangle and rings. Think of it!"

"Truly this district has an evil name for thieves and *budmashes*. The robber has carried the jewels to the city, and they are doubtless ere now broken up and sent to Delhi."

"You think, Abdul, there is no chance of ever getting them back or of finding the things?" enquired his employer as she settled her elbows on the table and stared at him fixedly.

"None; truly 'tis but a loss of time!"

"How lucky that I kept out the beautiful diamond and emerald pendant. It is worth all the rest. Such stones!"

Abdul sat more erect, and his eyes now assumed a look of keen interest, hitherto somewhat lacking in their expression, as he ejaculated a sonorous "Ah-h!"

"I admired the ornament so much, Verona made me take it. I have no jewels, and I have hidden it safely."

"Hidden it—and where?" he asked.

As he put the question Abdul's great turbaned head lay half resting on his shoulder; his countenance was childlike and bland.

"Nay, nay," she answered with a laugh, "I cannot tell you that; the very walls have ears."

"It is not then in the *dufta*?"

"Am I a fool?" she demanded with pardonable indignation.

"Nay; thou art a marvel of wisdom."

"I think I shall sell the jewel some day; it will add to my daughters' fortunes."

"They will have great fortunes, your daughters."

"Maybe."

"All you pay me for my risks and labour is but a few hundred rupees."

"If your commission is low—it is your own fault. The more you bring me, the more you receive."

"I receive but little. I am a poor man. I have a large family to maintain; they all look to me."

"They will be looking for you now!" said Mrs. Chandos briskly.

"Truly thou art a hard woman—hard as a rock."

As she spoke Abdul rose and closed the ledger before him with a bang. Mrs Chandos also rose, and with her foot turned back a rug in the middle of the room; under this was revealed a trap door, which she proceeded to unlock, whilst Abdul Buk lifted the heavy lid. Below was a small space, wherein were boxes and account books.

"Surely this is a great convenience," she said. "Here, in the old days of the factory, they too kept money and books."

The bag of knotted twine and the big account book were laid within, the trap door was closed, the rug replaced.

"I may not come here again for some time," said Abdul Buk. "Salwey spends half a week at Manora; I cannot understand what brings him here, unless he what you call 'smells a rat.'"

"Bah!" exclaimed Mrs. Chandos, with great scorn.

"Here I am ill at ease. Now, in my quarters in the cantonment bazaar, I feel all right. There I can do business, and take measures."

"Truly, yes," assented Mrs. Chandos, "'every dog is a lion in his own lane.' Your peons, and the little deaf writer, how fare they?"

"They are at your service. Behold! they are well chosen. They know neither pity nor fear. Thou art a woman with a strong mind."

"I am," she answered complacently, "and it is the mind that maketh the body rich! Meet me in two weeks' time, by chance, at the railway station—I will name the hour and day—and there we will confer about the loans on the wheat crop."

Mrs. Chandos as she spoke, turned down the lamp, and went out, locking the door of the office, while Abdul Buk stole round the corner of the bungalow and along the road to where his phaeton was waiting, and drove away.

CHAPTER XXXIII

THE next morning Razat Sing, a tall man, leading by the hand his blind wife, presented himself at the Chandos verandah, and asked to see the Mem Sahib.

"What would you?" she demanded, in her shrill voice.

"Great lady," and he salaamed to the ground, "protector of the poor, it hath come to my knowledge that Abdul Buk—whose rope is round our necks—will do much for a word from thee."

"Aré, what nonsense is this?" she screeched, in her fluent Hindustani. "Art thou mad? What have I to do with such as thee?"

All her daughters were assembled in the verandah, listening to this conversation; the servants, too, were, as usual, within earshot.

"It is true, O! lady, they say, that thou hast done him some noble favour; therefore, will he listen to thee. We ask not much—only to remain in the old house by the old well, on the soil on which I was born. Lo! when I say we ask not much—we ask our lives. Sixty years have I toiled and striven," holding up as he spoke his worn knotted hands; "I have not wasted my money on aught; I have gone no pilgrimages; I have held no feasts; I have fed scantily; I have worked harder than a mill bullock, but to no avail—the fruit of these hands hath gone to the money-lenders, for once, in an evil hour, I did borrow one hundred rupees. Alas, I am now in the toils of Saloo, the soucar—he groweth richer and richer as we wax poorer and poorer; and I have no son to carry on the debt—therefore am I driven forth, being old and feeble: Speak but one word, oh, great lady, and Abdul Buk will grant us our request."

As he pleaded the poor old creature, whose body was almost skeleton-like in its leanness, whose only garments were a dhoti and a ragged red turban, sobbed aloud as he went down upon his knees, and placed his head at the feet of Mrs. Chandos.

"Bah! what have I to do with Abdul Buk?" she cried, "and his affairs? Go! I mix not myself up with crops and beggars!" To avoid further importunity—and secretly startled and alarmed—she retreated indoors. The old ryot raised himself with a groan, slowly picked up his

stick, took his blind wife by the hand, and with downcast head led her away in silence. They were a truly pitiful sight. Verona and Pussy whispered together. Between them they had two rupees, and with these in her hand, Pussy ran after old Rarat Sing, and pressed the silver into his palm, but he seemed to be dazed with trouble, and scarcely aware of her gift.

"I know where he lives," said Pussy to Verona. "it is the old house under the big peepul tree, a mile off the Bhetapore road. Let us walk up there to-morrow morning, and take them some clothes. We will get Nani to help us."

The two girls constantly walked in the morning, but Dominga was a lie-a-bed. And now and then they were joined by Mrs. Lepell—also an early riser.

At ten on that same evening, Verona related the story of Salco to Mrs. Lepell.

"I meant to go to see old Rarat Sing, too," she declared. "My husband will give him quarters, and he can sweep up the leaves in the garden; of course, it will be a change from his home, but it still means food and shelter. If I could pay his debt, I would, but if I began to release the poor slaves, I should never have done—I might as well try to empty the sea with a tea-spoon."

At three o'clock the next morning the three ladies set forth on their charitable errand; the two girls carried a piece of calico for a turban and a little shawl, Mrs. Lepell some rupees. On their way they were overtaken by Salwey, who, strange to say, was also about to look up the unfortunate rascal; he dismounted and walked along with Verona, his aunt and Pussy being in advance.

It was a beautiful February morning; the dew was still glistening on the grass, the air was cool, the sky blue and cloudless; presently the little party came in view of a dwelling, standing some way off the road. There was a well, an enclosed patch of garden, a ruined cart-shed, and at the back some cow-sheds. The whole place had a forlorn and dilapidated appearance, but once upon a time had evidently some pretensions to importance.

Mrs. Lepell and Verona went to the door and knocked gently—no reply. They opened it and entered; the room was bare and scrupulously clean. The fire was out; near it were some earthen pots, an iron spoon and plate; some very old harness hung on the wall; in one corner was a plough and a battered leather bucket. The inner room,

into which they peeped, was dark; there they discerned a string bed, on which lay a huddled-up figure under a tattered coverlet.

Mrs. Lepell addressed this figure in Hindustani, but there was no reply. She went nearer, and turned back the comli, or blanket; the old blind woman lay with her face to the wall; she did not move when her visitor placed her hand on her shoulder, for she was quite dead. Charged with this appalling discovery, Pussy darted out to break the news to Salwey, who had been fastening up his horse. When he came in and surveyed the still figure on the charpoy, he looked very grave, then, as he led the way into the outer room, he said to the three ladies:

"Will you wait here? I will be back in a moment."

In a very short time he returned; he had an open clasp knife in his hand.

"It was as I feared," he said, "the poor old chap is dead too; he hanged himself with the well rope—I have just cut him down."

Having locked up the house of death, Salwey rode off at once to make arrangements for the inquest, while the three ladies returned home. Pussy, who was weeping bitterly, sobbed to her sister:

"You remember yesterday, Verona, what poor old Razat Sing said, 'he was asking for their lives'—it was true."

As the police officer galloped in to the cantonments he believed that he held in his hand the clue to Saloo's identity, for he had found a morsel of writing in the ragged turban of the suicide. If old Razat Sing was the means of delivering others from the usurer's yoke—he had not died in vain.

CHAPTER XXXIV

THE tragic fate of Razat Sing and his blind wife made a little stir for a few days in and around Manora, but, unfortunately, these suicides of despair were becoming common; public sensitiveness was somewhat hardened and callous—familiarity breeds indifference. Razat Sing had hanged himself; his blind wife had gone from darkness to darkness by the aid of a little poisonous root. There was an end of the old couple, and other affairs wafted these two insignificant particles down the dark river of forgetfulness. The great charity ball already mentioned was imminent at Lucknow; it was to be on a grand scale, and held in that notable building, "the Chutter-Munzil," formerly the palace of the kings of Oude. This function would be the brilliant closing event of the cold weather season. Residents from surrounding districts, soldier folk from distant stations, and crowds of tourists, would pour into Lucknow for the occasion, and thus swell the receipts of the fund. Tickets were only ten rupees; the committee had been most carefully selected; everything was to be thoroughly well done, and carried out on a scale of unusual magnitude. Mrs. Lepell, who was one of the patronesses, volunteered to chaperon Verona and Pussy, and had taken rooms at an hotel, where the two girls would be her guests. (Mrs. Chandos, not to be behindhand, had secured somewhat squalid quarters for herself in the abode of a friend, and would be present at the ball, carrying in her train Dominga and Blanche). This visit was an event for Verona, who had seen nothing of India beyond Manora and Rajahpore. The afternoon of her arrival at the Royal Hotel Mrs. Lepell drove the two girls out to see the historic Residency; its grey walls, torn and shattered by shot and shell, were now clothed by the most exquisite white and yellow creepers. The compound, that scene of such desperate bloodshed, was a velvet sward, intersected with neat paths and flowering shrubs.

It was only when the sightseers came to the graves, that Tragedy raised her face. From the Residency the party were driven round by Dilkoosha and into the cantonment. Here they saw numbers of people riding and driving; polo was going forward, bands were playing, and in some places the traffic of landaus, dog-carts, ekkas and bullock

bandies was so great that the roads were almost blocked. Here, too, were bugle calls, the sounds of cheery English voices, the distant hum of a great city. Here was another India to Manora, with its monotonous stretches of rippling cane, half-naked coolies, and a few red-roofed bungalows, clustered around the factory.

It was ten o'clock; the hired landau was at the steps and Mrs. Lepell and her charges were ready to start for the ball. The lady herself, who was always admirably turned out, wore a dress of a delicate mauve shade, and splendid diamond ornaments. Verona, in white, wore her pearls and a wonderful bow of brilliants, which fastened her corsage; these being her most valuable possessions, she had hoarded them in a little chamois-leather bag, and thus saved them from the thieves. No doubt her jewels and her dress were startlingly unsuitable to the daughter of Mr. Leppell's sub-manager, but she had resolved for once to enjoy the occasion, and to abandon herself to this evening's entertainment as the Verona Chandos of other days. Mrs. Lepell mentally seconded this resolution, and was determined that nothing on her part should be wanting to encourage the illusion.

When they arrived at the Chutter-Munzil, the ball was already in full progress (Indian ball-goers are notoriously punctual). Mrs. Lepell was recognised by many acquaintances as she moved up to a raised platform at the other end of the room, sacred to sitters-out. Many a glance was cast at her beautiful companion, and, indeed, Pussy, in a smart pink gown, with her luminous eyes and smiling lips, was a by no means ill-looking young person. All sorts and conditions of people were present—a charity entertainment covers many classes—but there was a large preponderance of smart people, and crowds of men, the dresses and the diamonds well up to the mark of a London ball-room. Verona stood by her chaperon on the raised platform, and looked down on the scene—the great pillared hall, the wonderful chandeliers and the glittering show. A multitude gay with uniforms, bright dresses, bright faces, and bright jewels, whirled round and round to the strains of a languorous, heart-broken waltz.

Among the dancers who swept by she noticed Captain Haig and Captain Fielder, and presently Salwey sauntered up and accosted his aunt.

"Why, Brian," she cried, "I thought you told me that you could not possibly get away?"

"I've just managed it at the last moment. I go back day after to-morrow. One ball a year is not much. Miss Chandos," turning to Verona, "I hope you will honour me with a waltz?"

"Yes, with pleasure," she replied.

"Number seven?"

"Very well," she acquiesced.

"And what do you say to the fag end of this one? just to try the floor."

Verona, rose, took his arm, and descended into the vortex and found to her great relief that Brian Salwey, in spite of but one ball a year, danced delightfully well. As she presently stood aside a little out of breath, he said:

"I've been trying to trace your jewels," and he glanced at her beautiful diamonds; "I see you had *some* left."

"Yes," she assented, "these I had sewn inside the sleeve of one of my dresses—they are the most valuable of all."

"I believe I am on the track of the others," he said, "but the necklace—has gone to Delhi."

"From whence I feel convinced it will never come back!" she said; "well, it cannot be helped. After all, it would not be much use to me now."

"I left your brother Nicky in charge of my stud while I am away; he is monarch of all he surveys. I expect he will keep the horses going pretty well."

"Yes, poor Nicky," she said, "he is so fond of riding, and would never get a mount at all only for you. You have been very good to him, Mr. Salwey."

"Good to myself," he rejoined. "Nicky is capital company for me, and I like him; there is a lot of grit about that boy; unless I am mistaken, he will turn out well."

As they talked, they were strolling slowly round the great ball-room, the dance being over, and among the crowd they encountered Captain Haig, who paused, not a little startled to behold the Miss Chandos of other days! On the spur of the moment he accosted her and begged for a dance. This she at once accorded him, and having scribbled down "Captain Haig" opposite number nine, passed on. Mrs. Lepell, who had found partners for Pussy, was now besieged for introductions to her friend, "the girl in white," and in a few moments after Verona's return to her side she had not one dance to spare.

Dominga and Captain Fielder were inseparable, and for once reckless of appearances; Dom with her lithe white figure, her red hair, green wreath, and bright shameless eyes, looked like a beautiful Bacchante. As Captain Haig lounged on the edge of the crowd, he overheard several sentences which sank into his mind and there abode.

"Do just look at that red-haired girl! how she is enjoying herself," remarked a man to his partner—a lady of a certain age and importance. "What a graceful creature she is!"

"Yes, she seems crazy with excitement! I really wonder Captain Fielder cares to make himself so conspicuous, especially as he is staying at Government House. She is a Eurasian, from that sugar factory near Rajahpore. Her mother is as black as your boot—she has aunts and uncles in the bazaar!"

"Nonsense, I would not have believed it."

"It is true, and here comes another of them," as Blanche swept by, in the arms of a dusky partner. Blanche, showing all her teeth, as she chattered incessantly; Blanche decked out in a flame-coloured frock, with long blue silk gloves and strings of shells in her hair.

"I daresay you would not believe that that girl opposite in white is their sister," and the lady indicated Verona with her fan. "She has been in England, and looks quite presentable, only for her paste ornaments! Mrs. Lepell brought her here to-night—such a mistake; they are awful people, and have no pretensions to be in society."

"At any rate, the girl seems to have any number of fellows clamouring to dance with her!" remarked the man rather dryly. "She uncommonly handsome. I should never have thought that *she* had a touch of the tar brush."

"Well, she has, and four annas in the rupee at least!" retorted his partner viciously. (Verona had been admired in her hearing, and was obviously overwhelmed with partners, whilst *she* had only three names on her programme, and was naturally envious and annoyed.) Captain Haig now too late, bitterly regretted his impulse. What a fool he had been to ask the girl to dance! He had no desire to make himself conspicuous by being seen with her; besides, what was the good of it? She and he must be strangers for the future. At one moment he thought of shirking number nine altogether—finally, he decided to claim it, and withdraw into some secluded place, and there sit it out. And here was number nine now! As the band

struck up "Valse Bleu," Captain Haig and his partner took one turn before they came to a full stop, and then they stood side by side in silence. He still deplored his momentary madness—what had possessed him? what was he to say to this girl? He was dumb, and from all sides rose the hum of voices, and there was a general effect of gaiety and social pleasure. At last he muttered:

"Shall we go on?" and slipped his arm round her waist.

At the end of a brief turn, he abruptly led his partner away into a distant corridor lined with seats. Was he ashamed to be seen with her? This was the humbling impression he gave his former goddess. Yet he felt the spell of her beauty drawing him towards her, precisely as it had done of old, and he also felt that he was bound to say *something*. How was he to tell her that he had adored her until the disclosure of her parentage had extinguished his passion? As he stood beside her, still tongue-tied, whilst she fanned herself with a languid grace, her mother flaunted by on the arm of a stout Eurasian. Mrs. Chandos wore the celebrated silk satin, a tuft of feathers quivered in her hair; at her throat sparkled the emerald pendant. She was talking so eagerly to her companion, that the presence of her daughter entirely escaped her sharp black eyes. As she disappeared down the corridor, Captain Haig stifled a sigh, and began without preamble:

"Miss Chandos—what must you think of me? but I will say one thing—I shall honour *you* as long as ever I live—and I ask for—nothing—don't hate me—but—" and he paused with embarrassing significance.

"Hate you, Captain Haig?" she exclaimed, looking up; "why should I hate you? I"—and her eyes involuntarily followed the little mincing pink figure—"I understand."

"I am most awfully wretched," he continued, in a lachrymose voice.

"'Into each lot some rain must fall,'" she quoted gently.

"By Jove, then, I've had a whole monsoon! all my hopes have been torn down and washed away. You know what they were."

Before she could make any reply to this question the band ceased with a crash, and a crowd dancers poured into the corridor, *en route* to the refreshment-room. As

Dom and Captain Fielder hurried by, she said, as she looked after the retreating couple:

"Captain Fielder is your cousin, I believe?"

"Yes," giving himself a mental shake, "my second cousin—not a bad sort of chap—rather a silly ass in some things."

"Now I am going to ask you a strange question. Do you think he intends to marry my sister?"

"Well, Miss Chandos, since you put it to me straight like that, I should say that I am sure he does not."

"Captain Haig, do you remember a note you wrote me the morning you left Homburg?"

"I do—I remember everything in any way connected with you" (this was a statement of the wildest exaggeration), "every dress you wore, every word you said, every look you gave me."

"You remember what you said in that letter?"

"I do. If ever the Princess wanted a champion, to summon *me*."

"I am no Princess now—but I need your help sorely."

"All right, only too glad to get the chance of being of service—to you."

"It is not for myself exactly—it is to help my sister Dominga." He frowned involuntarily. "Yes, I want you to use your influence with your cousin—to get him to put an end to this foolish affair—otherwise I am convinced it will end in a—a scandal. My father has had many troubles—he must be spared this. A family disgrace—would kill him!"

"He shall be spared this if I can manage it, but Jimmy is a queer mixture; in one way he is weak, and easily worked upon—in another, the more you oppose him the harder he resists. If I tried to interfere openly, it would do no good. Can't *you* persuade your sister to break it off?"

"No; she is hopelessly headstrong, and deaf as an adder to all my entreaties. She thinks"—and here she paused.

"What does she think?"

"You will laugh when I tell you—she thinks that I am jealous."

"Jealous of her, and that empty-headed dolt. Good heavens! I say, I'll tell you what I can do. The hot weather is coming on—I have invited Jimmy to spend a couple of months tiger shooting in the Terai. He is not

particularly keen, but I'll do my very best to persuade him. In two months he will have forgotten her—a fortnight is his usual limit—but she won't forget him, eh?"

"Oh, but that won't matter; for, as my grandmother says, 'One hand cannot clap.'"

"Do you mean to say your grandmother is alive?" he asked aghast.

"Yes, and a most remarkable woman," she replied, with the utmost nonchalance; "very clever indeed in medicine and nursing—full of wise sayings. I am extremely fond of her."

Captain Haig made no remark, and she continued:

"You will go soon—won't you?"

"Out shooting? Yes," he answered, with a start; "I'll make arrangements, and we will set out the week after next."

"Thank you, a thousand times."

"Don't—I wish I could do a thousand times more."

At this moment Dominga and her partner returned and halted directly in front of them.

"We have been having oysters—delicious oysters," she announced, and a wild vivacity was in her face and manner. "I'd advise you two to go and get some before they are all gone."

"Thank you, Miss Chandos," said Captain Haig, "but I have not your courage."

"Ch-a-ah! fancy being afraid of a poor little oyster—Bombay oyster! What are you two confabbing about? You look as if you were discussing the affairs of the nation."

Verona made no answer (a partner had come to claim her for the next dance), and her late cavalier replied to the question with a forced smile.

"We were only arranging the affairs of some of our friends."

Dominga, as she moved on, turned her long neck, and with one of her peacock screams, cried:

"Happy friends!"

CHAPTER XXXV

MRS. LEPELL resolutely refused to dance; she declared that she did not consider it compatible with her responsibility as chaperon. But she chatted to her many friends, and listened complacently to the warm admiration they expressed for the pretty girl she brought with her. All at once Brian Salwey came and threw himself into a seat beside her, and said:

"Now, I'm going to give you a shock, Aunt Liz."

"That will be nothing new," she retorted with a laugh.

"But this, I warn you, will be out of the common. Do you know what brought me here to-night?"

"The train, and a second-class gharry."

"Yes; and the solemn resolve to ask Miss Verona Chandos to marry me."

"No words can express my astonishment! Brian, you must be mad!" she exclaimed.

"No; although I do three acrostics a week, I'm still fairly sane. What have you to say against her? She is a lady, she is beautiful, and she is good. What more would you have?"

"Well, since you ask me, I would have a little money, and, my dear Brian! think of her family! Think of your mother-in-law! Think of your grandmother-in-law!"

"At present," he replied with the utmost composure, "I am not disposed to think of anyone but Verona, and if it comes to that, why don't you ask me to think of my father and my step-mother? My father married to please himself, and I shall certainly do the same."

"I had not the smallest suspicion of this," murmured Mrs. Lepell, opening and shutting her fan, with a meditative air.

"Has it not occurred to that I have been a good deal at Manora of late?"

"Yes."

"To what did you attribute that?"

"To a natural desire to see me, your Aunt Liz, your mother's only sister. You know you are rather fond of your Aunt Liz."

"I am," he assented, and he laid his hand in hers, "and as it was certainly my Aunt Liz who first drew my

attention to Verona Chandos, she has only to thank herself for the result."

"I am much attached to Verona myself; she is a dear, good girl; her beautiful face is but the outer shell of a beautiful, unselfish soul. Still, in spite of her mind and form, and much as I love her, I do not desire her as a niece. I know there is no use in arguing with you, Brian. What will be, will be. Your mind is made up, you will ask her to marry you, possibly within the hour."

"Possibly."

"And within the hour—she will refuse you."

"That remains to be seen," rejoined her nephew rising, as a general covered with orders came forward, and asked Mrs. Lepell if he might have the pleasure of taking her down to supper.

Verona had followed with Brian Salwey, who, with some difficulty, piloted his fair lady through the crowded room, and found two empty places at a large central table. She had scarcely been seated, and was taking off her gloves, when she heard her name spoken, and looking up saw a handsome, middle-aged woman, wearing a diamond tiara, leaning towards her eagerly.

"Surely it is Verona Chandos?" she enquired.

"Oh, Lady Ida!" she exclaimed, "is it you? What a surprise!"

"To you, but not to me. I have been expecting to come across you ever since I left Bombay," rejoined the other—speaking precisely as if India were a small country town. "The Melvilles told me you were out here. How do you like the gorgeous East? Not much," she added, answering herself, "you look a little pale and thin, but of course I would recognise you anywhere, by my very dear friend, your beautiful diamond bow! You and I must have a long chat by-and-bye," and with this remark she once more turned her attention to her companion, and her plate.

"Who is the very dear friend of your diamond bow?" enquired Salwey.

"Lady Ida Eustace—she lives near the Melvilles, who brought me up. I have known her since I was a small child. She is a charming woman—so popular. Don't you think her handsome?"

(Lady Ida had an oval face, an aquiline nose, a pair of merry dark eyes, and a presence!)

"Um"—doubtfully; "I think she has plenty to say for herself. Who is she when she is at home?"

"She is married to Captain Eustace, who hunts the Halstead hounds. They have no children, and travel a good deal."

"We have been globe-trotting, as usual," resumed Lady Ida, once more addressing Verona. "The doctors would not allow Cecil to winter in England—such a blow for him. Do you know what has chiefly impressed me in India?—the cold!"

Verona smiled and said, "I have not felt it yet!"

"I do assure you I was never prepared for it. At Delhi I simply could not sleep at night, and Cecil actually had to pile Persian rugs on his bed. I suppose you have done no end of sight-seeing?"

"No, indeed. I only began yesterday."

"What have you been about you lazy girl? Well, we move on to Benares day after to-morrow, and you had better come too?"

"I am afraid I could not manage that—thank you very much, Lady Ida."

"Pray who is your chaperon? Do let me ask her? Who brought you to the ball?"

"A friend, Mrs. Lepell."

"Lepell—Lepell!" she repeated, closing her eyes. "Now, let me think; yes! Her sister married a Colonel Salwey; she was a friend of mine, and died young. He married again, oh, such a little——"

"Excuse me, but I think you are speaking of my father," interrupted Brian, and looking straight at Lady Ida as he spoke.

"Oh! am I? Then you must be the boy I remember. Dear me! dear me! it makes me feel quite an old woman! How odd that I should meet you, and begin talking of your people. I've a dreadful way of stumbling into social pitfalls—and I was just about to discuss your stepmother. Now, tell me, when can I see your aunt?"

"Any time after supper. You will find her up on the dais place. She is wearing a sort of purple gown."

(A sort of purple gown!—that exquisite French garment of misty mauve and silver.)

"Very well—and, Verona, I must have a little talk with you. I suppose you are engaged ten deep?"

"Yes, but I think I could give you the lancers," she rejoined, "to sit out."

"My dear child! I am engaged; I am dancing with the Lieutenant-Governor! Oh, do please look at this party

who have just come in—the two women especially. It is not often you see such dark complexions in society! How *did* they get here? Observe the creature with the shell chains in her hair. Why! you know them!" as Blanche nodded at Verona; "who are they?"

"They are my mother and sister," she answered in a low voice, and her features were so controlled as to be almost expressionless.

"Good heavens!" exclaimed Lady Ida, and the colour flew from her cheeks to her hair. "Oh, my dear girl you are not serious!"

"I believe this is our dance," suggested Salwey, with admirable invention and composure, rising and pushing his chair, "and it has already begun. Shall we go?"

In another moment Verona and her partner had disappeared, leaving Lady Ida gazing at a certain group at a side table, and greatly puzzled to know whether Verona Chandos were in jest or earnest. Then she suddenly remembered that there was some queer story about the girl's relations in India, and her ladyship relapsed into unwonted silence, and left her supper untouched, and as soon as her cavalier was movable, requested him to pilot her to the upper seat in the ballroom, where she lost no time in making a search for a certain lady in a purple gown.

"We are just in time," said Salwey, as he and his partner re-entered the ballroom; "we can have a second supper." He felt the hand on his arm trembling, and the girl's face was ashen pale; undoubtedly the scene at the supper table had told; but she maintained an air of composure, and the dignity of a high-bred silence, and in another moment they were launched upon the current of dancers. The waltz was a well-known German favourite—many a step had Verona danced to it elsewhere. When the last bar had sobbed away into the empty air, Salwey led his companion out to the great flagged terrace which overlooks the river.

It was a splendid Eastern night, light as day—no Indian ball would be complete without the moon. There were numbers of couples on the terrace, and Salwey guided his partner to where there were two spare seats, close to the parapet! No skulking in corners for him. He was proud to be seen with the new Miss Chandos.

"There is a lot of 'go' about this dance, is there not?" he remarked. "It is like a bit of your former life—old

friends and all. I say, what a change it must have been to you, coming out to Manora."

"It was," she assented, without lifting her eyes from the river.

"I am going to propose"—he paused; she turned and looked at him gravely—"another change." And in quite a matter-of-fact voice he added:

"Miss Chandos, will you marry me?"

For a moment she stared at him, as if unable to realise the question.

A host of thoughts flew to her brain. Only one little month ago she had been prepared to marry Captain Haig, and she now recalled this fact with a sense of shame. But her mother's tongue and temper had strained her courage beyond the pitch of endurance. At the approach of her step she mentally quailed; at the sound of her voice her heart fluttered. Since then she had fought a stern battle with herself; she had braced her soul to accept the inevitable. Her health was better, her nerves were more composed, and she had resolved never to marry. Here was the first and only proposal she had received since her arrival in India (the promised land of proposals), and what a curious contrast was presented by this wooer to her former numerous suitors. He was a mere nobody—a Superintendent of Police. But then, he was not suing for the hand of Verona Chandos, the great heiress, but the hand of Verona, the penniless half-caste. He was well acquainted with her history, and with her circle of most undesirable connections. Whatever had been in the minds of her former lovers, this generous man was entirely disinterested. He cared for nothing but herself. Nevertheless, she was determined to say No. She would refuse to spoil his life, and to drag him into her miserable affairs. His aunt, too, who loved her as a protégée, would undoubtedly detest her as a niece!

She glanced from the glittering silver river to Salwey, who sat on the edge of the parapet leaning towards her, the shining flood at his back threw into strong relief his square shoulders and well-poised head. She looked into his face—his strong, stern face—his steady blue eyes, which were fixed gravely on her own, and anxiously awaiting her reply.

Another dance had commenced, and the distant music filled the air with a low, humming noise. Close by (with a partner and atmosphere of "Ess Bouquet") sat Blanche,

squeaking, giggling and jingling her bangles. "Oh, you nartie man—be quiett! be quiett!" and there was a sound of a brisk smack; "you shall not say so. No-a! Na-o!"

If Verona's mind had been momentarily undecided her sister Blanche now recalled her to her senses and hardened her heart to a fixed resolution.

"Mr. Salwey, you have taken me by surprise. You have done me great honour," here she paused.

"There!" he ejaculated; "I know—that's what girls always say when they mean to let a fellow down easy."

"I could not marry you—I will never marry any one."

"What is your reason?" he asked sharply.

"Need you inquire? I will never be a party to what is called a 'mixed marriage.'"

"As for example?"

"As for example, my own father and mother."

"Come, that is nonsense!" he protested impatiently.

"You are no more like her—than I am like him."

"Ah, but you cannot tell what we might become. I have no doubt we should both be miserable. My father——"

Then he interrupted:

"Your father came to grief, good, amiable gentleman, because he never could say the word 'no.' Now I can; in fact, strange as it may sound, such is my peculiar character, that my first impulse is to say 'no' sooner than 'yes.'"

"Then I trust you will pardon me for saying 'no' to you."

"It is not a case of pardon at all. For me, it is a profound disappointment. I scarcely ventured to hope you would accept me right off, but I thought you might give me a little encouragement—just a little bit of hope to go on with."

"I had no idea you cared for me in this way, Mr. Salwey."

"Well, I do. I have cared for you 'in this way' as you call it, ever since I first saw you in Aunt Liz's garden, sitting under the bamboo trees. You are the first woman I ever asked to marry me, and I think you will be the last. Of course, I am aware that from a worldly point of view, I am not much of a match for anyone—only a police wallah, a D.S.P. with five hundred rupees a month. I went to Harrow and was going into the Service, but I got a bad fall out hunting, and was laid on my back for a good while,

and could not go up for Sandhurst. Meanwhile my father married again—a woman none of us liked, but he was quite infatuated about her. She declared it was nonsense, my reading for the army; I should always be loafing about at home, for the chances were that I should not pass. She thought me dull—and, I confess I'm not particularly brilliant—so she got me a nomination in the police, and packed me off to India, and here I am. But I'm not bound to live here always. I believe I could get a billet in our own county. If"—he came to a full stop, and, then went on. "And is it really, No?" he asked looking at her steadily.

She bowed her head, and then lifted her eyes slowly, and looked not into his, but over his shoulder at the river. Suddenly she gave a little shiver, and exclaimed:

"Oh, what is it? I feel something so cold in the air. So—so—so strange!" and she shivered again. "I should like to go indoors, Mr. Salwey," standing up as she spoke. "Indeed I am most grateful to you now, and, some day, you will be grateful to me. I hope we may be friends till then—and always. Now please take me back to your Aunt Lizzie."

Although Captain Haig danced continuously—chiefly with the party from Government House—he happened to notice that Salwey hung about doorways, and that his eyes were constantly fixed on Miss Verona Chandos. Was he *épris* also? Would he dare to marry her? Brave Salwey! They had been at Harrow together, and Salwey had always been notorious for a species of reckless, and at the same time dogged, courage. Well, the girl herself was lovely—whatever her people were—and apparently fate had no stroke that she could not bear with dignity and fortitude.

CHAPTER XXXVI

It was just tiffin-time at the hotel, and Mrs. Lepell, somewhat weary and yawning, was about to summon her two young ladies, when her ayah hurried into her room in breathless haste, and announced :

"Salwey Sahib want see Mem Sahib," and her nephew followed almost on the ayah's heels. He looked so discomposed that she knew at once that something serious had happened.

"Oh, what is it?" she asked. "Is it Tom?"

"No," he said, glancing round the room to see that all the doors were closed—then lowering his voice, he added :

"It is Nicky Chandos."

Mrs. Lepell stepped back and sank into a chair.

"Ssh! don't talk loud. Tell me all about it. How did you hear?"

"The head constable has come in with a letter, and I am off in five minutes. I left the poor boy the use of my horses, and last night he was riding out to Manora on Baber, no doubt full gallop. Some devil had put a rope across the road. Baber broke his neck, and I fancy that Nicky was killed on the spot. They were found early this morning, with my dog 'Chum' on guard over the two bodies."

Mrs. Lepell endeavoured to speak, but failed.

"And the worst of it is," resumed her nephew, "the trap was intended for *me*; several people were anxious that I should break my neck—but poor Nicky had not an enemy in the world. Now I must be off to the inquest and funeral; I will leave you to break it to the family here."

"Oh, but really, Brian—I cannot!"

At this moment Verona entered the room.

"I beg your pardon," she said, drawing back from what seemed a private interview between aunt and nephew.

"No, no, no—Verona, come here," cried her friend; "Brian, you must tell her."

Salwey looked down on the ground for a moment, and then he said, with obvious reluctance:

"Well, I suppose I must. Miss Chandos, I'm sorry to say—I am the bearer of very bad news. Your brother Nicky——"

"Is hurt?" she questioned. There being no answer—
"Is dead?"

"Yes, he fell into a trap intended for me, and was killed on the spot."

Verona covered her face with her hands and leant against the wall.

"You know, *you* are the one to bear up," he continued, "you will tell Dominga—Dominga will tell your mother. Tell them"—and his voice shook a little—"the poor boy's death must have been instantaneous and painless." And without another word he opened the door and went out.

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When Mrs. Chandos and her daughters returned to Manora the following day, the funeral had already taken place. The sudden, as it were, departure of Nicky struck them all with a sort of icy chill. Nicky's place was vacant; his chair at the table stood empty.

Two days previously he had been among them, noisy and cheery; whistling about the bungalow, knocking things over and carpentering; the most active and animated of the whole family—and now he was gone—not down the river to Mr. Salwey's, not into Rajahpore for an hour or two, but gone—gone, never to come back. There were his books, his shabby clothes, his cap, his tennis bat—everywhere they looked their eyes met something to recall Nicky. Nicky had never been his mother's favourite child—Dominga, Blanche, and even Pussy, came far before him; but her grief was loud, ceaseless, and unreasoning. She had long fits of frantic screaming that nothing would subdue, and poor old Mrs. Lopez, who was heartbroken at the death of her darling, vainly endeavoured to soothe her.

Good Mrs. Cavalho, true angel in cases of sickness and death, tried her best to comfort them both. At times, such was Mrs. Chandos's grief, that she was as if demented, tossing her head from side to side, and crying out:

"Oh, my poor boy! Oh, my poor boy! He is dead! And that is not the worst—oh, you do not know the worst! Oh, my poor boy! my poor boy!"

These cries were looked upon as the delirious ravings of a grief-stricken mother; no one could make out, or even attempted to understand, what Mrs. Chandos meant by saying:

"Oh, you do not know the worst! Oh, you do not know the worst!"

And one thing no one ever knew. It was never discovered who it was that tied a well-rope across the road, where it was so dark under the Peepul trees, and thereby caused the death of Black Baber and Nicky Chandos.

The shock of his son's death appeared to have aroused Mr. Chandos from his condition of mental stupor. As he stood by the graveside, a dignified, pathetic figure in deep mourning, many now looked upon Paul Chandos for the first time. Although the hand of affliction was heavy upon him, and he was worn and weary-eyed, there was an indefinable distinction in his air, and people were quite prepared to believe the fable, that he was the next heir to an ancient name and great estate.

CHAPTER XXXVII

THE hot weather had driven most of the residents in Rajahpore to the hills. Mrs. Lepell had departed to Naini Tal, having vainly urged Verona to accompany her, but Verona refused to leave home, and boldly declared that she would like to find out if all the tales about the season were true? The crops were reaped; where yellow grain and green vetches had flourished was now but miles and miles of a substance resembling red sandstone. The trees were leafless; the hot wind roared about the country, driving clouds of sulphur-coloured dust before it, and the thermometer was over a hundred in the shade. The doors of the bungalow were fitted with transferable screens made of matting; over these a coolie poured water continually, in order to establish a damp atmosphere.

The punkah swung lazily in the darkened room, in which sat Pussy and Verona, and occasionally Mr. Chandos, but Mrs. Chandos and Dominga made no effort to exert themselves; the latter lay brooding on her bed for hours with a packet of love-letters under her head. The expedition had duly come off. Jimmy was away in the Terai, tiger-shooting with his cousin, Captain Haig, and Dom was deserted and distraught. She became thin, haggard, and unbearably restless; she spent hours writing letters—and lived upon those she received. Dom rarely left the house nowadays, and made not the slightest attempt to conceal her indifference to Baby Charles. There had been no more notes for him in "Mrs. Beeton's Book of Household Management," and on the rare occasions when they happened to meet she snubbed him ruthlessly.

"What did it mean?" After puzzling over the matter the station gave up the riddle. They never imagined, even in their most brilliant moments, that Dom had become tired of playing a part in a mock love affair, and that all her thoughts, and hopes, and fears were buried in the jungle—along with Jimmy Fielder.

One afternoon Verona received an urgent message from her grandmother to say that she wanted to see her at once in her own room. When she entered the *dufta* she discovered the old lady sitting with crossed legs on her red lacquered bed—her sole costume a charm and a chemise.

"What is it, Nani?" enquired the girl, languidly.

Nani continued to fan herself with a prodigious hand punkah, and presently remarked :

"Aré, Bai ! it is hot to-day !"

Verona nodded. Surely Nani had not wished to see her merely to inform her of this obvious fact !

"Shut the door, child, and sit down," resumed Mrs. Lopez. "Tell me, have you noticed how happy Dom is these times ? how she sings, and no longer mopes like a sick owl ? Would you hear the reason ?"

"If you please, Nani."

"Once I told you she had a lover. Now I tell you—that she joins him in a few hours."

"Oh, no, Nani—it is impossible !"

"Listen—he is one they call the 'Honourable.' At night he often came out here to meet Dom—they thought no one knew. Cha-a-ah !" snapping her fingers ; "it was the talk of the bazaar. It came not to the knowledge of the station folk—save of Salwey—who knows all things."

"But about to-day, Nani ?"

"Oh, yes, Dom goes to-day, and she is packing now," she added tranquilly.

"It must be stopped," said Verona, suddenly rising to her feet. "Think of the shame and disgrace ! your own grandchild !"

"Nay, you are my grandchild, also Pussy—and my best of all is gone. Aré, Hai ! Hai ! Hai ! But Dom is naught. I know her, and keep my own counsel. I have two ears—but one tongue. I meddle not with Dom. No ! 'Let everyone sweep before his own door' !"

"Oh, Nani, tell me what you know—and how you know it ?"

"How I know I will keep to myself, but *what* I know—is this. There is the gate, half a mile beyond the factory, where by signal the train stops for sugar and passengers. At night, when one would travel that way, old Jaggerie shows a lamp—he will show it at ten o'clock, when the mail for the north goes by. The plan is this. Dom, with her luggage carried by a syce, will be there and meet the train. Her lover is in it—they go together to Cashmere."

"But he is in the Terai shooting," interrupted her listener.

"He is not there now. Dom's letters have recalled him to her. You go into her room and see if I do not speak truly. Then come back."

Verona entered her sister's apartment, immediately after her knock, and found her busily engaged in rolling up clothes into the smallest space, and stuffing them into a leather bag, over which she threw a cloak instantly—an instant too late. She looked hot and flushed.

"What is it?" she asked, peevishly; "what do you want? A paper? Goody me! what paper?"

"*Truth.*"

"Then it is not here, so now," with a stamp of her foot, "you go, go, go. I am busy."

"Well?" enquired Mrs. Lopez, when Verona had returned.

"Yes, you are right. We must think of something?"

"You suppose you can stop her—the Red Cat—no, better let her go."

"Oh, Nani, no. Think of father, and do help me!"

"If you have a stout heart—it can be done. Verona, see, you take Zorah, my woman, you wear a dark frock, and lie in wait near Jaggerie's hut. When he hears the train coming, about one mile away, or less, he raises the lamp, and shows light. He is old and very fat; but you are young. You throw a cloth over the light, and run away and blow it out. No light, no train, you see—and so—Dom will be left."

"It is a splendid idea. I think I can manage to carry it out, Nani, unless there is some other plan. Would you tell mother?"

"No; does she ever gainsay Dom?"

"Then Pussy?"

"She would but laugh and cry and let them go. No, you are the only one, and Zorah may be trusted. You snatch the light—she will hide it."

At nine o'clock that night—a night so warm that the heat seemed to fan one—Verona (supposed to have gone to bed) and Zorah, the ayah, stole forth, and hurried away to the gate crossing. They arrived at the hut, and crept round to the far side, and then stood in the shadow, motionless. In twenty minutes' time Dom appeared, stepping delicately on the warm, dried-up grass, and carefully holding up her spotless white gown. She was closely followed by a syce, carrying a box and a bag. Arrived at the gate she stood still, and held a long whispered conference with old Jaggerie.

"Truly, in fifteen minutes," he said aloud, "in fifteen she will pass. You can hear the train three miles away

this still night. When she comes to the bend I raise my lamp and all will be well," and forthwith he returned to his *huka*. The fifteen minutes seemed to Verona like fifteen hours. She felt cold with apprehension as she stood in the shadow of the hut, straining her ears, and catching no sound but the shrill chirping of insects in the air and the discordant cry of some night bird. If she missed the lamp, and was caught and unmasked—what then? If with jeers and derision Dom threw her aside and made her escape—what then? And, after all, what right had she to put herself forward in Dominga's life? She did it, since no one else could, to save the name of "Chandos," to fend off this blow from her father's bent head. Oh, here it was! She heard the train coming, and how her heart thumped! At first the sound was merely a dull rumble, becoming gradually louder and louder. Now it was at the turn, and Jaggerie shuffled out of the hut swinging a great square lantern. But what was *this*? Something from behind sprang on him, and dragged the lamp from his nerveless grasp, and there was instantly thick darkness! The cries of Jaggerie—"A Shaitan! A Shaitan!" were mingled with the agonised cries of Dominga calling for the "light, the light, the *light*!" But none was forthcoming; no spark to penetrate an oppressive darkness—dense and thick as velvet. The train, the flaming engine approached, was upon them with a roar—the great furnace for a second illuminated a woman's figure at the gate, standing with extended arms; then the locomotive thundered by, with its rumbling string of carriages. The door of one of these stood wide, and in the aperture appeared the gesticulating form of a man. Another second, and the mail train for the north had swept by, and Dominga was left behind! For some time she appeared totally unable to realise this fact and remained rooted to the spot, staring after the rapidly receding red light with dazed, incredulous eyes. Meanwhile the syce had darted into the hut and brought forth a piece of blazing wood. Too late, alas! it was all too late!

Suddenly with one wild scream Dominga flung herself face downwards on the track, and abandoned her soul to an outbreak of passionate Oriental despair. Truly, she was no Chandos now, this woman who lay in the dust, beat her head upon the ground and shrieked aloud in piercing Hindustani.

Zorah stood afar off, holding the extinguished lamp, but Verona, who was nearer, viewed the spectacle with horror. Dominga had gone mad with grief—could that dreadful, writhing, shrieking thing be her very own sister?

By-and-by the syce approached next Jaggerie (still groaning and shaking from the efforts of his devilish experience); attention was diverted, Zorah beckoned, and in another moment was joined by her fellow conspirator, and together they hurried home, maintaining a somewhat guilty silence.

"So you have done it arl-right?" said Nani, as Verona entered.

"Yes, and I am—so sorry now—her grief was awful. Oh, Nani, I feel as if I had killed Dominga!" and overcome with emotion and excitement, the girl burst into tears.

"Pah—pah! no fear you kill Dom! More like she kill *you*. And what says your proverb—'A cat has nine lives.'"

Verona sat up till one o'clock anxiously listening until she heard the stealthy return of her sister, and then she at last went to bed, and fell into an uneasy sleep. The next afternoon Dominga appeared, looking terribly pale and shattered. Her face was badly cut, her temples bruised, her legs were lacerated. She was really a startling sight, but in reply to her mother's anxious questions she replied:

"I fell in the garden last night—in the dark."

"Oh, my! it looks more than that—you make so little of your hurts, Dom. What has happened?"

"It is as I say," she answered savagely. "Let there be no more talk."

Later, after the household had retired, Dominga, lamp in hand, came trailing into Verona's room, and stood and stared at her as she lay—with glaring, glittering eyes. She seemed to be the incarnation of some wounded tigress. After an alarmingly long pause—

"You know what it was," she declared in short gasps, "yes, you were there and stole the light! The syce saw you! Oh, you deceitful devil! you envied me my love, and so you snatched it away. I know, too, that it was *you* who begged Captain Haig to take Jimmy tiger shooting. Yes, *he* told Jimmy and Jimmy told me! We both hate you. May you be accursed! May you go to Hell for ever, and be the prey of serpents. And accursed

you will be—even now—for I shall make your life a torment ! ”

Here was indeed the raw stuff of poor human nature illuminated by a blaze of passion. Dom, with her fierce white face and furious eyes, was the very embodiment of hatred, malice, and all uncharitableness. Her lips were quivering and bloodless; she seemed scarcely able to breathe, and shook with the vehemence of her feelings.

“ Dom, you are talking nonsense,” protested her sister. “ I did prevent your running away with Captain Fielder; you will thank me some day—and I have kept your secret loyally. This sort of affair is hateful to me—I do assure you.”

Dominga’s incredulous laugh was almost like the cry of a hyena.

“ I know that Captain Fielder does not intend to marry you; you see what his love means! I thought you were proud of being a Chandos. Could you bear to drag your life out in the gutter? ”

“ I could bear to drag out my life, following Jimmy round the world on my bare knees—I would ask no more; and last night I had not seen him for six weeks—and I was within three minutes of meeting him—I—who have been counting the very hours since he left me. And you—you ”—she choked—“ oh, I cannot speak! but I could tear you to pieces ”; and with a moan like some wounded animal Dominga staggered from the room.

Whatever Dominga had told her mother, she now evinced to her third daughter a bitter and invincible animosity—life became almost insupportable, and the wretched girl’s only refuge was either the den or the dufta.

“ Aha,” exclaimed Nani, “ it were better to have been advised by me. Dom avers that you have ravished from her her lover—‘ The Honourable ’—the lord’s son. She hath her mother’s ear, and for all your good will, Dom has set her against you. So you will find, ‘ that to gain a cat—you have lost a cow ’? ”

CHAPTER XXXVIII

WERE she to live to the age of one hundred years Verona could never forget that hot weather at Manora--the memory was burnt into her very soul. It was not merely the absolute desolation of the season, not only the breathless atmosphere that seemed to quench all vitality, the endless hours spent in idleness, because the rooms were necessarily darkened, it was not the maddening "Tonk, Tonk" of the coppersmith bird, the thoughts of her past, the hopelessness of her future, but every other sensation was dominated by the fact that under the same roof, in that still, dim bungalow, abode two malignant spirits, whose every glance and word breathed invincible hatred and ill-will.

These were her mother and Dominga. Since Dominga's elopement had been so successfully frustrated, she had fallen into a state of lassitude and lay for hours motionless, and, so to speak, torpid, coiled up with closed eyes in her long cane chair. When the all too terrible sun had sunk below the plains across the river, and the soft blue haze of an Indian evening had taken its place, she would wander alone about the untidy garden, muttering to herself incessantly (as if rehearsing some important conversation). She still wrote many letters; these the Dak runner now no longer carried fearfully through the high elephant grass, or the thorny Dak bushes of the Terai, but they travelled in full state on His Majesty's mail tonga, and were delivered by a postman in orthodox uniform at a certain hill club. The hot weather had seemingly the power of relaxing the stiff social bonds peculiar to the cool season. Most women cast aside curling pins and corsets and wore muslin wrappers, and their hair "plain." Men abandoned formality with waistcoats and collars, and Mr. Lepell frequently walked over to smoke a pipe with his sub-manager. On these occasions Mrs. Chandos never appeared; she was incessantly occupied with business, and besides this, Tom Lepell was one of the two men in the whole world whom she not only hated but feared. Mrs. Cavalho constantly trotted across to sit and gossip with Mrs. Lopez on a little plot of scorched grass in the garden; here, under the stars which shone between the bare branches of the cork trees, the two old women talked for hours; talked of their youth and their good days, before they had become a pair of

derelicts moored beside the Jurra river. Pussy and Verona occasionally joined them, and listened with unaffected interest to tales of visions, and warnings, of life, love and death, and many other curious matters.

In the dim, soft light Mistress Cavalho's old face seemed to assume a different expression—perhaps Youth himself came to her in the dusk, along with his tender recollections? Her eyes looked large and brilliant, the lines of her features appeared faultless. She had a low, sweet voice, and there was something in the personality of Felipa Cavalho that was inexpressibly soothing and restful.

Now and then one of the girls wandered alone about the thirsty, sunburnt garden, accompanied by her own reflections. Pussy's mind was entirely occupied by Alonzo—when would she meet him? What would he think of her new yellow hat? and Verona, too, had musings sacred to her own heart. Her thoughts frequently turned to Salwey, as she paced the narrow "kunker" paths. She had not seen him for a long time! He never came up to Manora now! No doubt, he had outgrown his foolish fancy. After all, was it not precisely what she desired? Yet, even as Verona assured herself that all was for the best, she was conscious of an inward pang, and of a half-stifled sigh. She was aware of something blighting in the atmosphere—an enervating, creeping influence, which made her feel languid, callous and numb. Was this merely a temporary lassitude—the effect of the pitiless hot weather? or—horrible thought!—was it the native element developing in her veins, stealing into her heart and claiming her for its own at last?

Occasionally Verona joined her father and Mr. Lepell as they sat and smoked together on the verandah, but on these occasions Pussy yawned and went to bed, for she found their conversation much too dull. Their theme was of the shop—of mango wood fuel, of rab and goor, and contracts and transport, and new machinery. But Verona, who had not her sister's easy faculty for sleep, remained languidly interested, and still more interested when her father asked his guest in a casual tone:

"By the way, what has become of Salwey? I've not seen him about lately?"

"Oh, he is out of the district; the hot weather is his busy time," was the reply.

"Why?" enquired the girl; "I thought during the hot weather everyone remained at home in a state of torpor."

"Not every one, especially a police officer," rejoined Mr. Lepell. "The hot weather is the idle time in this circle. When the crops are cut, and tillage awaits the rains, people have no occupation; they sit round the village 'Chabootra' and smoke and talk and quarrel; they brood over old feuds, they argue over wrestling matches and cock fights and land, and they kill one another with lathies or reaping hooks. I can assure you they keep Salwey and his men pretty well on the run. We have four murderers lying in Rajahpore jail at this moment. I say, young lady, you are looking pulled down. Why don't you accept my wife's pressing invitation, and join her in the hills?"

"If Verona were to see the hills she would never return here," declared her father with a melancholy smile.

"It is very kind of Mrs. Lepell to ask me, but the rains may come any day, Nani says, and it is not worth while to move."

"There is no sign of the south-west monsoon yet," argued Mr. Lepell, "with all due deference to Mrs. Lopez. By the way, I often notice your mother driving to the city at the hottest time of the day. She must be a veritable salamander!"

"Oh, yes, but Abdul Buk is ill, and her tenants are giving her a good deal of trouble."

"Aha! you see, the hot weather again! Please God, the rains come before long."

The rains came at last. For dreary and hopeless months, the country had lain bare and brown; now, almost in a night, the heat-cracked plains were clothed with grass, and the fainting trees and plants were lit up with young leaves; everywhere was the sound of running water! The ducks quacked triumphantly, as they swam on the former drive; frogs hopped hilariously about the verandah, and even invaded the bedrooms, whilst their relations in the marshes made an uproar that murdered sleep! Jurra river, flooded to the brim, brought down on his breast all manner of strange things, including stranded, sand-embedded charpoys, that had been the last resting-place of corpses—for Jurra was a holy river—and Verona and Pussy, who had languidly rowed about its shrunken, hot weather dimensions, now went farther than before. One evening, as the two girls were passing below the little white house where the police wallah lived, they descried him and his dog "Chum" sitting together in the verandah.

He signalled to them immediately, and came running down the steep steps which led through the garden to the water's edge.

"Hullo! So you are back," called Pussy from her nest among red cushions in the stern.

"Yes; how are you?" But as he spoke, he looked at Verona. "The weather is getting a little cooler."

"It is not particularly cool yet," she replied, resting on her oars and raising a colourless face.

"Won't you come up and see my diggings, and have some iced lemonade or tea?"

"Oh, do let's go, Rona?" pleaded Pussy, with outstretched fingers, every joint of which was eloquent. "I've often been."

"Yes, come along," he urged, fastening the boat; and he held out his hand to Pussy, who sprang ashore with alacrity, saying:

"I know my way! I'll go to old Jaloo, and tell him to get ready the lemonade and cake. Oh, I must have some cake," and she bustled up the steps and disappeared among the orange and apricot trees.

"No, thank you," said Verona, looking at Salwey's still extended hand; "I prefer to wait, like the train—ten minutes for refreshments."

"You mean to say you won't honour my poor abode! I'd like to show you my photographs of home, and some books, and odd things I've picked up in the district."

"I'll come another time, but I'm a little tired. I don't think I could face your hill."

"I must say you look completely played out; you ought to have gone to Aunt Lizzie. I say, I shall row you back."

As he spoke he stepped into the boat, closely attended by "Chum," and motioned her to the place recently occupied by her lazy sister.

"But what about Pussy?" she asked with a faint smile, as she arranged the cushions and leant back with a sense of well-earned repose.

"Oh, Pussy is all right. She and old Jaloo are tremendous pals. She was often here—with Nicky."

Verona inclined her head.

"Miss Chandos, this is a lucky chance!" he resumed.

"I wanted to see you alone."

"Yes?" and she coloured faintly.

"I have found out about the robbery and how it was effected. I've not been away all the time, though my

house has been closed. I came back to see what the mice were doing! ”

“ Yes, I—understand.” She smiled as she added, “ What an artful cat! ”

“ One morning I went up early to the *dufta* and examined the walls more minutely. I detected the marks of bare feet; it was evident that the thief—a very thin man—climbed on the shoulders of a tall confederate, and squeezed himself through the window, which, as you know, is high, then cut a board out of the press and looted the jewels; the traces of the footprints are faint, but I have made out that one foot lacks a toe. Now, it happens that Abdul Buk’s eldest son is as lean as a herring, and has lost one toe in an—adventure. It was he who offered your ring for sale; his family believe him to be in Fyzabad, but he is really in Delhi jail. At first he swore that your mother had given him the ring as a bribe. Now, solitary confinement, low diet, the loss of his smoke and a wholesome fear of the law, have changed his tune! ”

“ And what have you discovered? ”

“ We have discovered much. For instance, that Abdul Buk—the benevolent, the collector of cantonment house rents, the dispenser of promises, the ladies’ praised and petted Abdul—‘ dear old Abdul’—is nothing more or less than a receiver of stolen goods! ”

“ Nonsense—that respectable old man! ”

“ Yes, and he does business on a large scale, though he takes good care never to put his own paw into the fire. I believe I have got him at last! Little does he suspect that he is sitting on a mine, and that the match is in my hands——”

“ And when will you apply it? ”

“ Immediately. I have some slight reason to suspect that he is one of the agents of the notorious Saloo. If I can only bag the *two* with one charge, won’t it be splendid? ”

“ Splendid indeed; you will have gained your heart’s desire, and I shall congratulate you most sincerely.”

“ I should be glad if I could catch Saloo, but the feat is not exactly ”—a pause—“ my heart’s desire! Saloo’s identity is a dead secret; he is an old fox. I’ve heard that he is a *marwarri* down Poonah way, but this is not confirmed. Saloo has hitherto baffled every effort to trace him.”

"If you were to consult my grandmother, she would advise you to look in the ink pool!"

"No doubt!" rejoined Salwey, with a short laugh. "Have you ever seen her appeal to it?"

"No; but she believes in it implicitly. It is magic, is it not?"

"And black magic at that. I am myself orthodox, but I must admit that I have witnessed some extraordinary and utterly unaccountable things out here in the far East——"

"Tell me, please, about the ink pool!"

"Oh, well, when a native wants to find out something, he gets hold of a small boy, bribes him with promises, takes him to some quiet spot, pours ink into the palm of his hand and commands him to look, and to report what he sees!"

"Yes——"

"The seer is supposed to describe some remarkable scenes. One of my constables consulted the oracle with respect to Saloo. Personally and officially I am not supposed to countenance such—irregularities."

"No, but you heard the result," said the young lady, with an air of conviction. "What did the child see? What did he say?"

"He said he saw Saloo—and that Saloo was a woman!"

"Oh!" cried Verona, suddenly sitting erect. "Now that is too ridiculous; no woman could be so crafty—or so—wicked."

"Many women are both."

"You speak from experience——?"

"No, thank God; I know little about them!"

For a moment there was an absolute silence, merely broken by the soft lapping of the water against the sides of the old boat. Salwey looked at his companion as she reclined among the cushions; her home life was telling upon her, the East was stealing her rare beauty, her face was colourless, the exquisite outlines of cheek and throat were emaciated, and the brilliant eyes looked lack-lustre and spiritless.

"Tell me," she began suddenly, "is it only children who see things in the ink pool?"

"Yes. Only children!"

"But why?"

"They are supposed to be endowed with some ethereal gift, which remains with them until their hearts are

touched, their emotions awake; then it leaves them—the power is lost—the door, as they say out here, is shut.”

“What a pity! I wonder if I am too old to look into the ink pool?”

“You have never, I infer, cared two straws for anyone?”

She shook her head—slowly—and as she did so the truth came to her in one dazzling flash—she cared for *him*! He had touched her heart. It was amazing to discover that of all her suitors, with their advantages of social status, wealth, surroundings, the only one who had roused her interest was this Indian police officer, who sat there within a few yards, bareheaded, grave-eyed, with his arms resting on the oars. It was true that he was poor; a miserable “parti” from a worldly point of view, but he was a strong man!—a strong man, armed with many fine qualities, who had entered her heart and closed the door on all others. Were she still Verona—the heiress—she would gladly be his wife, but as Verona—the Eurasian—she must keep her secret from him and all. But, oh, what a temptation! To go away from Manora, to forget—to go with Brian, who loved her—for her own sake——!

No, no, no; for his own sake she would never marry Brian Salwey.

As the lady’s reply was a suspiciously long time in coming, her companion said:

“Besides, you are disqualified! If you have never loved—many have loved you!”

“What do you mean?” she asked. “How can you know? At home——”

“At home I imagine your conquests were Legion. Out here—there is Haig.”

“No, no,” she protested; “he does not care; he cannot forgive my birth. Once he volunteered to be my champion—there is an end of all that.”

“Well then, there is myself,” was Salwey’s bold announcement. “I—whatever comes or goes—will wear your colours to the end of my life, between my heart and armour! Accept me—as your knight?”

And “Chum,” the dog, leaning his muzzle over his master’s arm, seemed to second the proposal.

Verona looked down and slowly shook her head; never had she felt so miserable. She seemed to see the panorama of her future, the absolute weariness, and absence of interest from her life. And yet it must be so! Then, with a

sudden movement, she raised her face, and confronted her companion. Hard work and the hot weather had told upon him also. There was not an ounce of superfluous flesh upon his figure, the keen blue eyes were sunken and his jawbone was squarely prominent.

"You must wear the colours of some other lady," she said in a low voice.

"No," he answered resolutely; "yours only—till I die; I will never give you up."

"See, I have brought you some lemonade, you lazy people!" said a voice behind Salwey. And there was Pussy, her face wreathed with smiles, her hands full of cake, and Salwey's vain old bearer—his venerable beard dyed red—standing beside her with a little tray and two tumblers of liquid in which tinkled blocks of ice. Salwey rose at once, and handed one of these to Verona, and took the other himself.

"I wish your enterprise success," said the girl, as she smiled at him gravely before drinking.

"To my heart's desire," he replied with significance, as he pledged her with a bow, and tossed off the contents of the glass.

"Now, I am going to row you back," he said, turning to Pussy, "if you will get in, and sit here beside your sister."

"O—ah! how nice! O—ah! I do love being rowed—it is such hard work—I do hate it!"

In a few minutes the trio had floated off, leaving Jaloo, the red bearded, with his spotless coat and pointed leather shoes, standing, tray in hand, watching their progress with eyes of grim disapproval.

There was the boat moving slowly up the surface of the broad, shining river, now swollen far above its usual limits, its brimming waters almost on a level with the plains; in the prow sat a white dog, in the stern two dark-haired girls in white; in the midst his master, bareheaded, rowing against the current with long, easy strokes. A rainy season sunset lit up the scene with a magnificent blaze of crimson and orange; the combined brilliance cast a dazzling glamour over the water, and the figures in the boat seemed transmuted to gold.

"What a fool was his master!" grunted Jaloo, as he stood gazing; "was he not well enough, and yet he would surely marry one of those women, doubtless the girl with the proud eyes, whom they in the bazaar called the

‘Belait’ (Europe) Missy.” With this conviction he turned his back on the receding bark, and proceeded to toil up to the bungalow with his tray of jingling glasses, grunting and grumbling all the way.

“I do believe it was you who sent us all the books and mangoes this hot season,” said Pussy; “now, was it not, Mr. Salwey? Mother thought they came from some of Dom’s friends. Oh, the mangoes were so good and juicy. I loved them—but Verona loved the books.”

“I am glad you were both pleased,” rejoined Salwey with a smile.

“Dom doesn’t read now, nor Mother; she is so busy at her own books, since Abdul Buk has a boil on his neck. Oh, goody me! she does work. All day long and half the night.”

“At books? Do you mean that your mother writes?”

“No, no, no; only in account books—about her propertee—and she has such piles of them! I saw them,” giggled Pussy; “I peeped into the office the other day, when she was with Nani. My, such books! all ruled, like a draught board. Such rows and rows of figures!”

“Surely you must be making a mistake?” and Salwey paused abruptly, rested on his oars, and contemplated Pussy with a glint of steel in his blue eyes, “only one class keeps accounts that way.”

“But no, no, no; I am quite certain,” she giggled. “I thought it awfully queer—and what class do keep such funny books?”

“Money-lenders,” was his curt reply.

“Mother is so fond of figures—oh, so mad about them. Perhaps,” still giggling, “she is playing at being a soucar.”

“Perhaps; but she never struck me as a likely person to play—at anything!”

Oh, Pussy, Pussy! what a gigantic cat you have suffered to escape through your imprudence! You have aroused the dawn of suspicion in your boatman’s shrewd mind!

The golden light disappeared with the rude abruptness of an Eastern sunset; then came the changing touch in the air, the smell of rank water plants, the flip of a bat’s wing; a silence and gloom which had fallen on the landscape was shared, for some inexplicable reason, by the little party in the boat.

CHAPTER XXXIX

TWO evenings after this boating party Mr. Lepell and his nephew had a long interview with Mr. Chandos, who heard with astonishment that in Abdul Buk's house in the bazaar part of his daughter's jewellery had been recovered. That Abdul Buk's money ledgers had been examined, and he stood exposed as a cheat, a swindler, and a thief. He was a true wolf in sheep's clothing, who had contrived to pass himself off as an inoffensive, if somewhat garrulous, old man. Terrified by his situation, Abdul had turned King's evidence, and had confessed all, and figuratively given away his employer. His employer—incredible as it seemed—was Mrs. Chandos.

It was she, who for twenty long years had been the chief usurer in Rajahpore; she it was, who had lent money, taken bonds, charged huge interest, extorted pitilessly, ground down the faces of the poor, and was very wealthy. It seemed inconceivable, but it was proved beyond doubt that Rosa Chandos was no other than the notorious "Saloo." Her husband lived too much in his splendid dreams, his books, and his opium (alas! for those little black pills), to realise who Saloo was; for, as he had repeatedly assured Mr. Lepell, he had nothing to do with soucars now. His monthly salary he handed to his wife; and Rosa, his wife, was a notorious usurer! At first he declared that it was impossible—for one thing, she had no capital.

"She had a large amount of capital, secured in her mother's name, in the Bank of Bengal, as well as shares in half the good things in India. She had impressed deeds and papers which did not belong to her, and she must relinquish them at once, or her office would be searched. We will wait here, Chandos," said Mr. Lepell, "and you can talk to your wife about it. These papers are the property of zemindars, her debtors; she has come by them illegally. If they are not given up, there will be a row. Salwey and I wish to manage this thing quietly, for the sake of you and your family, and that is one reason why Brian rode out here before dark and came first to me, so as to disarm any notice; but he has a search warrant in his pocket."

"God knows, I have gone through many things in my life," declared Mr. Chandos, with dignity, "and I

have been brought low in the world; my wife has her faults, but she is no money-lender, that is certain."

It was also certain that Mrs. Chandos happened to be in a peculiarly bad temper that evening; she had had a quarrel with Dominga; and although she adored Dom, they had their little differences.

Dom was the only creature who dared to withstand her mother, and their disputes were terrible. Beginning in the ordinary every-day English tongue, as the altercation waxed in fury, they passed into shrill Hindustani, from that to "Gali" (abuse) and to hear the pair when the battle was raging an outsider would have supposed them to be a couple of mad grass cutters! Mrs. Chandos was walking about the dining-room in a highly-strung condition, when her breath was almost taken away by her husband entering the room and demanding "the keys of her office?"

At such an impudent request, she simply laughed in his face.

"Give them at once, Rosa," he said, with astonishing decision, "and clear your character; there are terrible charges against you. If what the police say is true, you have covered us all with shame and disgrace."

For a moment Mrs. Chandos was too paralysed to speak, but she speedily found her tongue, and overwhelmed her husband with such a torrent of wild, shrieking abuse, that she literally drove the poor man before her, backing him down the verandah steps into his own sanctum. Then turning swiftly about, she found herself face to face with Salwey—Salwey, in full official dress (khaki uniform, with narrow red collar, spurred boots, and cord breeches).

"The keys of your office, if you please," he said, holding out his hand.

"Get out of my house," she screamed. "Get away!"

"The keys of your office," he repeated, with the utmost composure, "I do not wish to proceed to extreme measures, but I have a search warrant here, and I will break open the door."

"What do you want, you thief! you beast! you spy!"

"Stolen bonds and documents which I've every reason to believe are in your possession. The keys!" He spoke with an air of decision and command.

The keys were not to be had, and to the astonishment of the peeping servants, the door of the *dufta* was taken off its hinges and Mr. Lepell and Salwey entered in the

wake of two men in blue coats and red turbans—in other words, constables. The desk was opened, also the press. These did not yield much, but thanks to a hint from Abdul Buk, the rug was lifted, and the trap door laid bare. Everything necessary to incriminate Mrs. Chandos was found in this secret hiding-place. Their owner looked on in silence, but her pocket handkerchief was torn into rags, and in her eyes sat two devils. The bulk of the papers were carried into Mr. Chandos' smoking-room, and subsequently examined at leisure.

Yes, these were the books of "Saloo"; there were her webs, there were her flies. There were receipts, there were letters from Abdul Buk, replying to certain instructions; there were bags of rupees and notes, the ledgers disclosed receipts for very large sums invested in various ways. Mrs. Chandos had followed her effects with hysterical screams, precisely like some bird of prey whose nest had been robbed! Finally, she stood in the middle of the room, unashamed, furious—and at bay. Mr. Lepell, Salwey, Dominga and Verona were present, as well as poor old Mrs. Lopez, who cowered in a corner muttering to herself and weeping inaudibly.

When these proofs of guilt and rapacity, cruelty and avarice had been exposed, Mr. Chandos turned to his wife, and said in a shaky voice:

"So, for twenty years you have secretly carried on your father's trade. Whilst your children have lacked education and common necessities, you have hoarded money and been the ruin of hundreds. And I thought, till to-day, that I was beyond the reach of shame! I thought that after long penance I might once more venture out and face the world. My cousin is dead and, as Mr. Lepell is aware, I have been summoned to England to take up my place there as head of the family. Since Nicky is gone, there is no heir to come after me; but for the sake of my girls I had almost decided to claim my own. This," turning fiercely on her, "I will never do now. Do you suppose I will put such a woman as *you* in my aunt's place? No, I will let my name be called across the seas in vain. I will live and die out here—an obscure Anglo-Indian."

At the name of Charne, and the news of her husband's succession to the property, Mrs. Chandos' face changed, her eyes lit up like beacons.

“Bah! you old guddah!” she cried. “these men have stuffed your head with silly nonsense; if I did take interest, what harm? I traded with my own money. As to Charne—since you are hanging back, *I* will go to England, and claim it *for* you.”

From many years of terrible experience her husband knew that she invariably carried out her threats, and in a sudden transport of fear and fury he snatched the picture of Charne off the wall, smashed the glass, and destroyed the sketch.

“Idiot!” jeered his wife, “you will be sorry for that to-morrow. You have broken your fetish!”

“And these papers,” he said, dragging a packet from a drawer, “are the proofs of my identity.” He held them towards his wife, and then with a sudden, furious energy, tore them into shreds, and scattered them over the floor.

“Charne is only mine for life,” he gasped breathlessly, “the place is strictly entailed. For the rest of my days I live here—because of *you*. I am sorry for the girls; and of all my children, I am most sorry for Verona.”

“Verona!” interrupted Mrs. Chandos, at last finding her voice; her face was working and livid with fury. “You throw away your great estate to punish *me*! Oh, ho! Well, now! see—I will punish you!”

She glared at her husband, as if she was going to fly at his throat; then she drew one long breath, and announced with grim composure:

“Verona is not our daughter.”

CHAPTER XL

"OH, ho! yes, it is true what I say," continued Mrs. Chandos, breaking a dead, incredulous silence; "she is no more to us than this book," and she seized a copy of "The Newcomes" and pitched it across the room.

"Aré, it is a relief to my heart to speak and to get rid of her," and she turned and looked at Verona; "for ever since I had aught to do with that girl she has been my thorn and curse."

"You are beside yourself, Mrs. Chandos," protested Mr. Lepell, "all this excitement is too much for you. Mrs. Lopez, will you not take your daughter away and persuade her to lie down?"

"Cha-a-ah! I am not beside myself," screamed the fury with a stamp, "and if you will listen—all of you—you shall hear the true story." As she spoke, she flung herself panting into a chair.

"Oh! it is more than twenty-six years ago since I married that oloo" (owl), and she indicated Mr. Chandos as she spoke and stared back deliberately into every gazing face. "Oh, he was so lazy! We lived up in the hills at first—and he used to just loaf and shoot; one cannot pay bazaar on that. We had two children, Blanche and Pussy; they were—not fair, no, and I could see that he was awfully disappointed. Money was low just before our third child was expected, and so he went down to the plains to seek for an appointment. The baby, a little girl, was born at Murree. She was very dark—once again—so dark! I knew you would be very vexed," turning on him; "you were always hoping for a fair baby—that would be a true Chandos."

Mr. Chandos endeavoured to interrupt, but she silenced him with a wild gesture of her hand. "No, no, no! Wait! wait! wait! I will not be long. In the little bungalow next to mine was a pretty young English girl, an officer's wife; she had a baby and she died, but her baby lived. I lived—my baby died. You begin to see. Eh?" She paused and gazed about her. Her audience were now dumb.

"Her husband, a young artillery officer, was crazy with grief. Aré, it was bad! They were not long out from home, and seemed friendless. He was going to Afghani-

stan immediately on active service; our bungalows were in the same compound, and so he came to me, and he said :

“ ‘Look here, I believe you are an officer’s wife, and have just lost your baby; will you take my poor little one, like a good, Christian woman, and be a mother to her till I come back? I have eight hundred pounds in the Bank of Bombay. I shall make a will; if anything should happen to me it will go to you altogether, if you will undertake to provide for the child.’ Well, he was so awfully handsome, and in such awful trouble, and the baby was so pretty and so fair, I, like a fool, agreed! His name was Hargreaves—Eliot Hargreaves—and his wife had run away with him. She was engaged to someone at home—oh, a grand match—but she preferred the poor young officer, and eloped with him to India. She was an earl’s daughter. Her name was Lady Vera Bourne; the child was called after her, but I named her Veronica. Of course, I heard all about this runaway match from the ayah—and that both the families were so angry; the couple were in great disgrace, and got no letters, and they were very, very poor. They lived in quite a cheap little bungalow, not much better than mine. Three weeks after Mr. Hargreaves marched with his battery he was killed at Maiwand; so I claimed the money which he had left me, and passed off the child as my own. No one knew the truth except two ayahs, also a native apothecary and a native pleader, who got me the money. When my husband saw the child she was three months old; and oh, he was so pleased with the little fair Chandos! ”

Here the narrator paused for a moment, closed her eyes, shook her head, and laughed with shrill derision.

“ Oh, yes, she was a pretty baby! she used to be called the little ‘Rani’; when she was two years old, Fernandez Godez came to see my mother, took a fancy to the child, and offered to adopt her. Well, then I was in great luck and got her off my hands. She goes to England with her, and was brought up really like a little princess. But at the end of twenty years, back she comes—there she is,” gesticulating with a tremulous hand. “ From first to last, as I said before, she has been my curse. With the money her father left me I began my banking business; I could never have done so otherwise; and according to all of you I have been awfully wicked! Well! it was *her* money that tempted me! As for herself, she comes here, and has stolen from me the affection of my husband, of

my daughter"—pointing to Pussy—"of my poor son Nicky, and even"—indicating Mrs. Lopez—"my mother! It was owing to her that Salwey has always been coming about Manora. It was owing to her jewels, which I showed to Abdul Buk, that the poor man was tempted, and he has been shamed and put in gaol. Vera Hargreaves"—pointing to Verona—"you have nothing to do with us, and so you go out of this house." She pointed to the door. "Good-a-bye!"

"But what proof have you of this extraordinary story?" demanded Mr. Lepell, who seemed to be the only person who had retained his wits.

"Oh, plenty of proof! The old apothecary at Murree is still alive, and will bear out my tale about Lady Vera. The chaplain who christened the baby when she was but three days old can speak, and the name of Vera Hargreaves will be in the church register. Besides, I have a photograph of her mother which the ayah gave me. I have a letter from young Hargreaves after he left Murree, and a little card-case and a book with a crest inside. I don't know why I kept these things, I am sure, but since the girl came out I have felt certain that this blow-up would have to happen some day—and here it is!"

The confession was evidently a dreadful shock to Mr. Chandos; the fire of his indignation had died down; he sat crouched up in his chair in a condition of mental and physical collapse. Verona had been with him less than twelve months, and yet she was far dearer to him than any of his children. The blow seemed to have broken his heart; he gazed at the girl, his face working, his eyes dim with pain, and held out his trembling hands.

She went over to him, looking very white, and said:

"I cannot realise this news, it seems incredible; I am most unfortunate—I seem to belong to no one."

(Whilst she was speaking, Mrs. Chandos had risen and rushed out of the room, and in another moment she might be heard uttering shriek after shriek, and indulging in a terrible attack of her screaming hysterics.)

"I shall always think of you as my father, though I suppose I shall have to go away. I daresay kind Mrs. Cavalho will take me in for a few days?"

"Oh, Verona!" and Pussy rose and threw her arms round her. "You cannot leave *me*! you must not leave us! you must not! you must not! I cannot live without

you—it will kill me! You shall not stir, for I shall die!" and she burst into a flood of tears.

"The best thing to be done," said Mr. Lepell, "is for you to go up to Lizzie; I suppose you can remain here for the night, and I will take you to Naini Tal myself to-morrow."

All this time Salwey had remained in the background, listening to Mrs. Chandos' wild confession. He now came forward and made a rather important statement: "You remember the lady who sat opposite us at the ball supper, Miss Chandos—Lady Ida Eustace. Her sister, Lady Vera, married a Mr. Hargreaves. It is quite true that it was a runaway match, and all the family were implacable until poor Lady Vera died in India, and then she was forgiven. It was a tragic story. I remember hearing of it as a boy—of beautiful Lady Vera, and how her husband was killed three weeks after her death. The baby, it seems, did not die after all; Lady Ida, you see, is your own aunt, so you are not entirely without someone belonging to you. Well, now, I think," taking his uncle's arm, "we had better go away; you have to make your arrangements for an early start to-morrow."

CHAPTER XLI

THE days which followed her momentous confession were passed by Mrs. Chandos in the darkness and seclusion of her own room (and on the bungalow there fell a sense of extraordinary peace). Here she gave audience to her mother and to Verona. Sitting in that dim apartment, watched by a pair of implacable black eyes, Verona heard the details of her parentage and infancy. Mrs. Chandos rendered up to her letters, photograph and proofs, which established her as the child of another race. She also urged her to remain with them until Mrs. Lepell came down from the hills. In Manora nothing of importance was ever undertaken without the help or countenance of the reigning lady; and if Verona went away suddenly, there would be—oh, such talk! Verona, whose affection for Mr. Chandos, Pussy and Nani, was very real and warm, agreed to remain as a member of the household until arrangements were completed for her return to England; and in those critical days Verona's manner was a beautiful study in tact and forbearance. The news that she was only a child by adoption, and that her name was Hargreaves, was allowed to gradually ooze out to the ears of the neighbours, who had been secretly wondering what all the smothered fuss had been about; and what was the cause of so many letters and telegrams being delivered at the Chandos Bungalow?

Mrs. Lepell had telegraphed and written to Verona, urging her to join her—she was not strong, and to descend to the plains in the rainy season was impossible. In October or November she was going to England and could escort her friend home. But Mr. Chandos clung to Verona in a way that was pathetic; Nani and Pussy bewailed her suggested departure so loudly and continuously, that she decided to remain in Manora for the present.

The Trotters and Watkins were aware that a great stirring of the waters had recently taken place in their vicinity; they were acquainted with the tale of the adopted daughter—but they did not know all. Much was known in the bazaar, but not elsewhere—when the station has one topic, the bazaar has a dozen. Even the bazaar could not guess why Salwey Sahib was staying at the big bungalow—instead of at home; nor did it know that for hours he

was closeted in the dufta with Mrs. Chandos. Brian Salwey had discovered Saloo, after much toilsome search, and yet now he was anxious to hush up her identity, and to conceal her iniquities. With this sole end in view, this truly brave man passed whole mornings alone with Mrs. Chandos and her ledgers. He, too, had a capital head for figures, and went systematically through all her books, and discovered that although morally a culprit of the blackest dye, yet she just managed to keep herself clear of the sword of Justice. There is no law to prevent people paying (and they will) one hundred per cent. But Salwey was strong and resolute; piece by piece he wrenched her prey from the clutches of Saloo. In spite of her shrill expostulations during those long early hours, mortgages were remitted, claims were abated, restitution was made.

The process was almost like dragging a calf from a famished tigress, but it was accomplished with inexorable determination. Mrs. Chandos's usual weapons, such as imprecations, abuse, personal insults, and piercing screams, might just as well have been addressed to a stone as to the figure who was steadily working through her accounts. Such an attitude amazed her; she had struck terror to the hearts of her father and her husband—but this calm, austere young man, he frightened her. Day by day she saw her balance ebbing—day by day she restored sums of money to those she had despoiled. She was compelled to sign orders, and letters, and receipts, that made her writhe with impotent rage. Once, in an early stage of the proceedings, she had rebelled and shrieked out:

“Why should I permit this robbery? I will not—I defy you! What can you do to me?”

“I can acquaint the world with your identity—and cover your family with shame.”

“Cha-a-ah! I care not!” she screamed, “who hath money, hath many friends!”

“Also,” he continued gravely, “it will cost you your life!”

“Am I a fool?”

“No, and therefore you will comprehend that your enemies are legion; you have been the cause of much suffering, and even of death; you will not keep your gain and go free.”

“What! do you threaten?” she yelled.

“I believe I can protect you from ambush and assassination, but here poison is a fine art; all who know of

her, spit upon the name of Saloo, and whoever rids the world of Saloo, would be well thought of by his fellows. Your days would be numbered—worth about a month's purchase—you must buy your life!"

"Buy it, of you?"

"Yes, in a way—for I am shielding you. Were I to transfer this frightful business to others"—here he struck the ledger before him—"and it is the work of several men—would they be silent?"

She was dumb.

Like all bullies, Saloo was an arrant coward. Moreover, she had no wish to die—as a girl, she had seen one case of poisoning, and it sufficed. Therefore, she succumbed, though her voice still rose loud and shrill; and over each payment there was a protracted struggle.

Occasionally as Verona sat with her grandmother, she could hear the low growl of a man, and then a high prolonged reply. One day, as she was arranging Nani's knitting—she now aspired to socks—the ventilator between the two rooms, which was always shut fast, suddenly fell open, and a torrent of shrill and distinct abuse instantly flooded the room.

"What, all this trouble and toil for Chandos, and to save him, and his good name—'tis a lie, you do it for that girl! Bah, you love her! Now she is a great lady, do you think she would look at such as you—a pig of a police wallah—I knew her sort."

Verona rose, and hurried over to close the ventilator, and as she reached vainly for the cord, she heard:

"Come, now Mrs. Chandos, don't excite yourself. Let us stick to business."

"But you know Verona will go to England, and never think of you again. Eh, *speak*? Say you know!"

"Yes, I know," came the reply, "now be good enough to sign here." And at this instant Verona, with a brilliant colour in her face, succeeded in reaching the cord, and violently slamming the little shutter. So now she understood why Mr. Salwey had seemed so determined to avoid her. Why he scarcely spoke when they met to the granddaughter of the Earl of Sambourne, though formerly he had been on the best of terms with the granddaughter of Nani Lopez! He accepted the change in her fortune like a stoic, and had tacitly and resolutely relinquished her! She almost wished she were once more a humble Eurasian—the *protégée* of his Aunt Liz.

During these last weeks, those tedious trying weeks at the end of the rains, Mr. Chandos had been ailing, and the thought of losing Verona filled him with despair. He could not endure the mention of her departure, although he knew that she must soon be restored to her relations, and the Melvilles, who had written out to claim her. Verona divided her time between Mrs. Lopez in the mornings, and Mr. Chandos in the evenings; she read to him, talked to him, cheered him, and had almost persuaded him to return to England with her and see his beloved Charne.

"Yes, I really think I would die happy, if I could behold it once more," he exclaimed; "people change—but places do not."

"Then you will come home with me," she urged, "yes, in the same ship. What a good time we shall have together; the sea voyage will set you up! There is nothing like the sea."

"Ah," he said, "I've no doubt it would; but what am I to do with *them*? They could never go home. Imagine my wife in county society—as Mrs. Chandos of Charne?"

"I am now going to ask you what I have never dared to do before. Would you mind telling me why you married Mrs. Chandos?"

"I married her," he answered, "chiefly to pay my cousin's debts. He was deeply involved in her father's books. I had backed his bills; he deserted me and went home; I remained to face dishonour. Miss Lopez, the money-lender's daughter, was good enough to like me. Her father offered to release me, if I would make her my wife, and I did"—here an involuntary sigh escaped him—"for between that and ruin I had no alternative. Pussy is a good girl; you will be kind to her, I know; somehow I don't think you and Dominga ever had much in common. Your aunt has written out for you, I saw her last letter and telegram—what date does she name?"

"The fifteenth of October, but I can put it off; I will wait until you feel ready to come home. Even if you do return here—surely you should see Charne? Yes, and show it to *me*, and wind up all your affairs."

"I will think it over, Verona; somehow when you talk to me, I feel inspired with hope and courage. I have not been home for twenty-nine years—to return has always been my dream! Well, my dear, I will sleep on your advice!"

The next morning a servant coming in early to sweep and dust the room, discovered his master still sitting in his arm-chair—asleep, with a beautiful smile upon his face—the smile of one who was happy. Mindoo had never yet seen the Sahib's expression so serene. But why was he so still—so quiet?

The question was readily answered—Mr. Chandos had gone home.

CHAPTER XLII

THE difficulties in the path of his true love had but increased Jimmy Fielder's interest in Dominga—now that Dom was unattainable, she appeared to be almost indispensable to his happiness. He had been bored to death in the Terai, and bitten by the most ferocious of insects, grilled alive and half starved, all for one mangy tiger skin! He had been equally bored on a hill station; none of the girls were half as amusing as Dom—poor Dom, who was breaking her heart for him on the dim blue plains far below. Now and then he strolled to a certain point and gazed down, and thought of that sparkling face, those ruddy locks, that lithe form and nimble tongue—the recollection of those days was still sharp and vivid. Then came an unexpected summons home, which blurred the vision. His father had tendered the olive branch and a handsome cheque; Lord Highstreet was failing fast, and his son, for his part, was now thoroughly sick of India. Captain Fielder hurried to Rajahpore in order to settle up, collect his belongings and say good-bye to the regiment and the Service. He must also say good-bye to Dom! She had made the memory of his stay on the plains a joy for ever, and he would send her a jolly present from Streeter's, as soon as he got home. Of course he had heard of the death of Mr. Chandos, and he was aware that the family had been in some mysterious trouble; the victoria, full of gay cushions, no longer waited under a certain tree near the club, nor were there any more letters to be found in "Two Kisses."

Captain Fielder had already secured his passage and paid his farewell calls; the station was almost empty, the ladies were in the hills. He was an idle man, and Fate finds some mischief still for idle men to do! Inspired by Fate, he made up his mind to drive out to Manora, in broad daylight and interview Dom, and see if his memory had not flattered her too much.

Captain Fielder was ushered into the drawing-room, and then in another moment she had flown to him, gasping and sobbing with joy and astonishment. She clung to his neck, her sweet breath (a peculiarity of Eurasians) fanning his cheek, her glorious hair falling back, her eyes gazing into his own. He succumbed at once to her spell, her wonderful seduction—her, for him, fearful fascination.

Oh, why was she not a lady? and one he could marry and take home, for Dom was so entirely to his taste; ever the same, yet never boring him.

"Oh, why should he not please himself, why? why?" he mentally exclaimed with impotent fury.

"Oh, ho! So you are the beast that has broken my daughter's heart," cried a shrill voice, and Mrs. Chandos, in funeral weeds, darted into the room. "It is well poor Chandos is dead, and does not know of your wickedness!"

"What do you mean, Madam?" he demanded, now releasing Dom, and boldly facing his assailant.

"That you wanted her to run away with you. Oh, yes, we all know *that*, and now you are coming to say good-bye, and thank you very much, before you go to England."

"Oh, he is not going to England!" screamed Dominga, seizing him by the arm, whilst her face assumed a sudden pallor, and her nostrils quivered nervously.

"Yes, he is; he goes in the Persia on the fourth," said her mother. "Is it not so?" and she flashed on him a look of fury.

Jimmy nodded his head emphatically, and Dominga broke into a wailing cry.

"Well, now I will speak plainly; before you go," said Mrs. Chandos, "you shall marry Dominga, and take her with you."

"Oh, impossible! nonsense!" protested her visitor, in an angry voice.

"No, no; not at all im-possible. You do many bad things; you pretend to every one you don't know my daughter, at all; you come out here on the sly, sly—all Manora saw you; you make love, but you do *not* break her heart and then leave her. You marry her, then you go!"

"But my good lady——" he interrupted.

"Cho-op!" she screamed, "see, now, I give you your choice; you take her—or you take—*me*!"

"What? you are mad—raving!"

"Yes; me, me, me," indicating herself with three sharp finger taps; "I am not poor, and I follow you all over the world, and I punish you. First, I tell the station; then I go to the orderly room and tell the Colonel; next, I write to your father! See, look, I swear it. I, too, take passage in *Persia*—sit at your table; every now and then I call 'Rascal! rascal! rascal!' So, too, in England; I follow in the street; I point, and cry 'Rascal, rascal, rascal!'"

"The police——" he began.

"Police take me up—arl-right. Say she is crazy! I go to court, I tell all the story—what fun for the newspapers, and all the world will know, and they will laugh, laugh, laugh, and cry shame. This I do, if it cost my life, and my money. Whatever I want I get. You ask! my husband could tell you—what I will happens; ask my mother and Dominga. I always come out what you call 'top dog!' So now you speak, and say which you take in the *Persia*—Dominga or me?"

Her black gown had the effect of making Mrs. Chandos look judicial and almost diabolical. She spoke rapidly, but with complete self-possession, only that a light in her eyes flickered like the flame of a candle.

Poor Jimmy was completely dominated by this fierce little iron-willed half-caste. Her victim felt instinctively that she would surely carry out her threat, and be as bad as her word. Well, after all, why should he not marry Dom? The present moment was critical—the future—was the future. He was immensely fond of Dom. She was handsome, dashing and clever, and adored him. Away from Manora she would be quite a striking personality. It was her background—for instance, this devilish mother of hers—which played the mischief.

Yes, yes; he would do it—marry Dom before the magistrate, or by special licence, and wire for another passage—and, fired with this reckless resolve, he drawled:

"I say, you need not make such a confounded hulla-balloo!" turning suddenly on his future mother-in-law; "I intend to marry Dominga!"

And Dominga, who had been clinging to his arm until now, on hearing this announcement, slipped down to the floor in a limp heap. She had fainted.

Here was a fine piece of news for all the station, the bazaar, the factory, the letters to the hills—"Captain Fielder had actually married, by special licence, Dom Chandos, and they had gone home in the *Persia*! What would his father say?"

And it had all been so secret! such a general hoodwinking was as incredible as it was successful. Poor Colonel Palgrave! Poor Mrs. Palgrave! Poor Mrs. Grundy!

Dominga, in the midst of the hastiest preparations, and the most bewildering happiness, nevertheless found time to pay a hurried visit to the Trotters and to Blanche. She

was marrying Jimmy for himself, but to be in a position to tell Blanche and Lizzie that she would one day be Lady Highstreet, and that in the meantime they must put "Honourable" on her letters, was a joy that repaid her for many weeks of sorrow. Lord Highstreet had transported his heir to India in order to avoid an undesirable match, his son was now returning, and bringing (did his father but know!) as wife, one of the daughters of the people!

The true history of the Honourable Mrs. J. Fielden remained a profound secret. Chandos was a good name; she was the grandchild of Chandos of Charne, and talked not a little of her ancestors. Dom, clever, imitative Dom! easily adapted herself to circumstances. She carried her head high, she dressed well, and had a just sense of her own place in the world. To see her in her carriage in the Park, with Jimmy grinning beside her, they presented a charming and instructive picture of domestic felicity—and in spite of his gallant boast, Master Jimmy *is* kept in bounds!

Mrs. Fielden's accent is unquestionably a little foreign—and when extremely angry she has been known to break out into the language of an unknown tongue—but then she is so accomplished! Who would believe the graceful figure trailing about the lawns of Hurlingham was the self-same woman, who, not so long ago, at a certain railway crossing, had dashed herself down, torn her hair, beat her head upon the ground, and called upon heaven and earth with heart-rending cries.

Dom has one little boy. He is not the least like his parents, who are both fair—he is too absurdly dark! His complexion is a puzzle to the entire Highstreet connection, but Dom herself is silent! She knows perfectly well (and buries the truth in her heart) that her darling Villiers Augustus bears a fatal resemblance to his dear little Indian cousin, Chandos Montagu-Jones!

CHAPTER XLIII

THE marriage and departure of Dominga was a signal for the general break-up of the Chandos household. The bungalow belonged to the factory—and they must all seek another home. Pussy was now betrothed to her Alonzo, who through Lepell interest had been promised a fine post at Tundla Junction. Nani Lopez was to accompany her daughter into the “Doon,” for Mrs. Chandos had still ample means, and was enabled (though shorn of her ill-gotten spoils) to give Pussy a fortune, and to personally live at her ease. It may here be mentioned that she and her parent spent the hot seasons in Mussouri, where, as the mother of Lady Highstreet, she receives in certain circles a considerable amount of agreeable attention.

The news of Verona's existence came as a delightful shock to the Bourne and Hargreaves families. Her new relatives were all eagerness to welcome poor Vera's girl with open arms, not to speak of the invitation she received from her friends, the Melvilles. It was arranged that she was to return home with Mrs. Lepell in November, and when it came to her very last hours in the Chandos Kothi, the grief of Pussy and Nani was profound. Poor Pussy wept incessantly as she hung about her adored Verona.

“Only Alonzo has promised to take me *home* some day,” she sobbed; “I would not marry him—and I would die—never to see you again—to think of it! I could not live—No!”

“And why do you cry so” remonstrated Nani. “Behold me!” her old face looked sharpened and blanched; two unshed tears glittered in her eyes. “I love Verona more than you do, and yet I shall never see her again. For me there is no hope; yet I do not weep. Verona has done good here, now she goes elsewhere—what says the proverb? ‘Great rivers, medicinal plants, and virtuous people, are born, not for themselves, but for the good of others.’ She goes to do good elsewhere, and I shall come and stay with you at Tundla, and we,” stroking Verona's cheek, “will often talk of *her*.”

“I will never forget you, dear, dear Nani,” whispered the girl. “Be sure of that, and I will write to you often—and send you such pretty wools.”

“Ah, core of my soul, no wool will make up for thee! And what of Johnny?”

"I would like to take him, but it would be selfish—here he has his freedom and all his friends." At the moment he was executing gymnastic feats among the lattice work; there was a rustle, a pair of watchful eyes, a swift patter, and Johnny, with a new blue ribbon round his neck, joined the party, and fearlessly climbed into his lady's lap.

"Aré, see, I have half a mind to take him to the Doon," announced Nani.

"No, no, Nani, let him stay here," pleaded Verona, "where he was first found. As long as he lives, he will be a happy little monument to you, and me—you saved his life, and I won his heart."

It was Verona's last evening at Manora. The Chandos bungalow was now untenanted, and she was staying with Mrs. Lepell. The two ladies and Salwey, who had come to say good-bye to his aunt, were strolling about the garden after dinner. To fitly describe Mrs. Lepell's garden would fill a small volume, for it was not alone her mere garden; it was her pride, her employment and her glory! In twenty years she had changed a bare straggling compound into a little Eastern paradise. The lawn was its chief feature; a large expanse of velvet turf, watered and clipped, and lined with borders of the choicest rose-trees—in some of which the bul-buls built their nests—it gave the impression of being full of sweet flowers, of shady nooks, of blossoming shrubs and graceful trees, and was the resort of many gay bold birds and brilliant butterflies.

The lawn lay immediately behind the house; beyond it were cool green pergolas shaded with ferns, and great patches of sweet pea; then came the maze of mango trees, thickets of lemons, and beds of tomatoes, gourds and lettuce. It was one of Mr. Lepell's jokes that his wife could not endure to see people promenading on her precious English turf! but to-night, she and two companions paced it slowly from end to end. They spoke but little. At last Mrs. Lepell said:

"And so you are not coming home, Brian? Well, I think you are very foolish. You have had three hot weathers straight off."

"I don't think it can be done this year, Aunt Liz."

"It ought to be done, when your Aunt Liz is in England. Don't you require some new clothes? Oh, there

is old Mordoo beckoning; I suppose he wants to speak to me about the doves. Don't go in, Verona, I will be back in two seconds."

"Your last evening here," said Salwey, breaking a somewhat constrained silence. "How glad you must be to leave the land of regrets—when you can regret nothing."

"You forget," she answered, in a low voice. "Two graves."

"Yes, and I promise you that they will be well cared for—since Mrs. Chandos is leaving the station."

"And is all her business arranged and wound up?"

"Yes, it is now in the hands of a trustworthy man—her books have been destroyed. She has, however, an ample income."

"So Saloo is no more, thanks to you. And your wish is accomplished."

How bold she was!

Her companion made no reply, as he paced the grass with his eyes on the ground, and his arms locked behind him.

"And you are not coming to England?" she pursued recklessly.

"No; you see my work is out here."

"Ah, yes, of course—and your heart is in your work!"

Oh, what an abominably forward girl she was! If Mrs. Lepell did not quickly return, she would find herself proposing to the man beside her. She felt desperate: cool and self-possessed as she outwardly appeared. Must she go home—and never see him again? Would he not speak even one word? Her heart thumped so violently, she was half afraid that he might hear it!

"You have had some interesting experiences," he remarked. "She was on the verge of the most extraordinary experience of all—did he not but guess the truth.)"

"But I am sure you will be thankful to get out of this country," he resumed, "and, needless to say—you will never return."

"I—I would return," she stammered—he suddenly stood still, raised his head and looked her intently in the eyes—"I would return," she went on, now with her gaze fixed on the ground—"if I was asked."

"Asked!" he repeated. "What do you mean—asked, by whom?"

"By the right person." Her voice had sunk to a whisper—her cheeks were two flames.

It was enough—further humiliation was spared her. Brian Salwey was not so simple as he had declared. With a sudden brusque movement he laid his hand on her shoulder; his face was white with the pallor of intense emotion, as he looked straight into her eyes and said:

“Am I the right person, Verona?”

Verona’s reply was inarticulate but sufficient.

“It seems incredible!” he exclaimed, after a moment’s stupefied silence.

The blue campanulas rang their bells, the bamboos whispered, the roses nodded to one another, and the great silver moon slowly slid up from behind the clump of mango trees, raised her broad face over the branches, and stared complacently on this couple in the garden. Here was Mrs. Lepell hurrying back, and as she approached, Verona, whose courage had entirely ebbed, ran into the verandah, and left her companion to break as best he could the news to his aunt.

“So!” exclaimed Mrs. Lepell, “I am absent for three minutes, and you seize the opportunity to ask Verona to return to India to marry you! Well, Brian, you *have* a good conceit of yourself!” This was not, as we are aware, an accurate statement of the case, but Salwey was eminently chivalrous.

“What is this I hear?” demanded her hostess, as she pursued Verona into her room. “Niece to be—or not to be! I do not think I can accord my consent!” and she survived her with a smile of good-humoured perplexity.

“Has it been asked, Aunt Liz?” she murmured slyly.

“Verona you are a most exasperating creature! Do please think of what will be said of *me* at home—of the match-making woman, who took time by the forelock, and arranged it all with her own nephew—such a wretched *parti*! Think of what your grandfather will say!”

“No, indeed, I’ve already had two sets of grandfathers, and I don’t care what anyone says—I shall marry to please myself.”

“Like mother, like daughter! Oh, dear child, do forgive me! I don’t mean to be horrid!”

“I intend to marry Brian,” continued Verona, in a firm voice, “who, when I was a nobody, treated me like a Princess—and loved me for myself.”

“And you will come out here once more, to be the wife of a police wallah!”

“Yes.”

"And since he really is not raving mad, I suppose he is to travel to Bombay—and see us off?"

"Yes, Aunt Liz, I suppose so."

Mrs. Lepell put her arm round the girl's neck and kissed her affectionately. "Of course, dear—speaking unofficially—I am delighted, and though I say it, who am his own aunt, few girls are in my opinion good enough for Brian. *You* are; and I should be entirely happy, only for thinking of your relations. Your grandfather so anxious to claim you—your aunt; if I only——"

"If you only say another word, Aunt Liz," interrupted Verona, "I declare I shall take a three months' return ticket to Bombay."

CHAPTER XLIV.

It was five o'clock on a June evening; a day of tropical heat had almost prostrated London, and many people were in the Park, strolling slowly to and fro, or sitting on penny chairs, watching the crowds near the Achilles statue. Among these lookers-on were Sir Horace Haig and his nephew, recently returned from India on sick leave. Sir Horace's little blue eyes peered forth from beneath their shaggy brows, with an even fiercer intentness than of old, as he leant on his cane, and delivered criticisms on those unfortunates who passed along the surrounding brown grass.

"I say, see these smart women!" he growled, "Mrs. Blynne and her daughter—flaunting in French frocks. I'll swear they live in two rooms, and have not a stiver over three hundred a year. How the dickens do they do it?"

"Credit," muttered his companion.

"Bah! widows with small incomes, don't get *that*! It's my belief she is gong to induce that old fool Montlevi, to marry her."

"I am sure I haven't the smallest objection," drawled Captain Haig.

"And here comes Lady Tracy-Fleet, with her two little girls on show, quite the pattern matron! and I happen to know she lost eight hundred pounds one night last week at bridge. There is Leoni and his daughter; she will have a great fortune. Eh, Malcolm? rather dark but you can't have everything!" But Malcolm made no reply; he was gravely considering his boots.

"Hallo!" exclaimed his uncle after a pause; "I say, do you remember that girl at Homburg—Miss Chandos, the heiress? Why, of course you do—you were rather gone in that quarter, eh?—old woman left her nothing, and she went to India and got mixed up with a lot of shady people."

"Yes; what about her?"

"Why, she is over there! and coming this way, with Lord Sombourne and Lady Ida Eustace."

Malcolm ceased to lounge and contemplate his favourite pair of boots, and instantly sat up erect and alert.

Yes; walking with measured ease between a tall, aristocratic old man and a tall, aristocratic woman, he beheld

Verona. She wore a long, flowing white gown, a black hat, and carried in her hand a dainty pink parasol. She looked lovely!

"So it turned out that she was Sombourne's granddaughter," resumed Sir Horace, "daughter of that Lady Vera, who made a bolt of it instead of marrying Sir Job Gilderman. Lord, what a hub-hub! I remember it like yesterday. The girl has not lost her looks, and, by all accounts, she will have a good fortune. I say, what do you think?"

"Oh, I think I'm going to speak to her," replied his nephew, who had risen to his feet, yielding to an impulse he only half understood.

"All right; don't mind me."

Captain Haig walked a few paces across the turf and confronted Verona, and swept off his hat.

"Captain Haig, how do you do?" she exclaimed "I did not know you were at home."

"I arrived a month ago—sick certificate."

"Let me introduce you to my aunt, Lady Ida Eustace—my grandfather, Lord Sombourne."

What a different class to the former family to which she had made him known!

"I believe we met in India," said Lady Ida, offering her five and three-quarter hand. "Positively this has been a real Indian day; we came out for a breath of air and are just going home to tea, close by. Will you join us?"

Captain Haig accepted the invitation with flattering alacrity, and presently fell behind with the young lady. As they passed close to Sir Horace that gentleman made a quick little sign to his nephew, as much as to say:

"Bless you, my children!"

Lord Sombourne's town house was spacious, imposing, and at the present moment delightfully cool and dim. Tea was served in a lofty drawing-room, lined with priceless old tapestry, and opening out of which was a conservatory full of palms and tropical plants, cooled by a splashing fountain. Here indeed was a home in every way worthy of Miss Verona; and as Captain Haig furtively surveyed the powdered servants, the Queen Anne silver, the rare old Sèvres service, all his former admiration for his Princess suddenly flamed into life. He felt convinced that she was the one woman in the world for him. There had been a temporary interregnum, but no one had been exalted to

the throne! Yes, he assured himself—he had always been true to her. Could he persuade *her* to believe this?

After tea Lady Ida, having excused herself to write a note, departed into the front drawing-room, and the pair were alone.

"It is hot enough, as Lady Ida says, to recall India!" exclaimed Captain Haig as he passed a delicate silk handkerchief over his forehead. "I don't suppose you care to be reminded of anything out there! It must be all like a bad dream."

"Oh, I don't know," she responded; "there were some good days, and I made some good friends."

"The Lepells, for instance."

"Yes; I came home with Mrs. Lepell."

"And so you were not a Chandos after all!"

"No; I have had a most varied circle of connections, and now I belong to my real relations."

"I cannot somehow call you Miss Hargreaves."

"To tell the truth I have hardly got accustomed to it myself!" and she laughed.

"I was always so puzzled—I may say dumbfounded. You were so utterly different to Pussy, and Dominga. Dom appalled me."

"Did she?—and now," looking at him with a mischievous smile, she added, "*you* are connected with her—and I am not!"

"Yes; and do you know, she is quite a success!—has swept the old Lord straight off his legs, and my uncle, Sir Horace, is actually enslaved! I say," he added, leaning towards her, and lowering his voice mysteriously—"*they don't know.*"

"No? I used to be dreadfully prejudiced; now I am not. I agree with Mr. Salwey that a slight mixture of Eastern blood is not a disadvantage."

"Salwey! By the way, that reminds me, I saw the death of his father in this evening's paper."

"Really!" she exclaimed, and her colour deepened. After a pause she added, "It must have been rather sudden."

"I cannot say—I am sure," he rejoined indifferently. "I believe it is a fine property, and I am glad poor old Salwey will get his innings at last. It will make a great difference to him. What do you think?"

"Yes," drawing a long breath, "and it will make a great difference to me!"

"Why," he asked, "should it effect you?"

"Because I need not now return to India."

"Then—then," he stammered, "I gather that you and Salwey are engaged."

"It is true," she answered softly, "though not yet announced in the *Morning Post*, and I tell you as an old friend. He is on his way home."

"Oh, Miss Hargreaves! I—of course—wish you every happiness, but this is very terrible news to me."

"To you? I don't quite understand?" she said sedately.

"You know very well how long I have been attached to you, don't you? And now I'm too late. Do you realise what brought me to England?"

"Sick leave, I think you said."

"Home-sick leave. I wanted to see *you*."

"Now, Captain Haig, please don't be so tragic!" she exclaimed with a touch of impatience, "you know very well that in your heart of hearts you did not care so very much for me. You will soon forget all about Homburg, and I will forget all about India, and so we will be quits, and, I trust, good friends?"

"I am sure you two must have had quite a nice Indian gossip!" said Lady Ida, sweeping into the room, note in hand; "I suppose you have been going over all your mutual experiences out there?"

"I—I—suppose we have," assented the visitor mechanically.

"I daresay you know Mr. Salwey?"

"Yes; we were at Harrow together. I was his fag, and he used to lick me for not cleaning his boots! I also knew him in India."

"He is on his way home now."

"So I hear," rising as he spoke. "Well, I am afraid I ought to be on my way home too. I am staying down the river."

"I hope you will come and look us up again, and meet your old school-fellow," said Lady Ida. "You will generally find us here at tea-time. We are always glad to see Verona's friends."

"Oh, thank you very much." Then he suddenly shook hands, gave the young lady one glance, and without another word took his departure. Presently the door below was heard to slam.

Verona went to the balcony, and gazed after the retreating figure. He walked rapidly for an invalid—his quick footfall had an impatient ring—and as he passed out of sight she heaved a little sigh.

"My dear child! what is the meaning of this?" enquired her aunt, placing two hands heavily on her shoulders, "gazing after a young man, and sighing like—I don't know what?"

"I am only looking after him—to see the last of an old love affair."

"What a funny girl you are!"

"That was what Mrs. Chandos used to say."

"Pray, don't mention that odious woman. And Brian—what would he say?"

"I adore Brian; I would not marry anyone else for the whole world, but really you must allow me to be a little sorry for the—other young man."

"Because you will not be his wife!" exclaimed Lady Ida, with dancing eyes. "What a pretty, conceited niece!" and she kissed her with effusion.

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Dominga and Pussy are married; so also, to the surprise of her friends, is Lizzie Trotter, and there are some changes at Manora. For instance, Mr. Lepell is at home, and Mr. Watkin officiates as a somewhat pompous regent, with Mrs. Watkin as his insufferable consort. The Chandos bungalow still stands empty, and the squirrels share the verandah with the sparrows and the crows. Unmindful of the drowsy Chokedar, they race along the flags or execute gymnastic feats in the lattice work with many a "Chir—ip—pip—pip—pip." Pretty little creatures, with sleek bodies and bushy barred tails.

One of the squirrels has a bit of faded ribbon round his neck—he is very tame. No, Johnny has not forgotten! at a sudden footfall, he will start and listen. When the house is open, he scours through all the rooms; in a certain window he is often to be seen for hours watching and waiting.

Alas, faithful little heart! your hopes are never to be realised. Other steps and other voices may come and go within the Chandos bungalow—but Verona will never return.





